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4

My Stepmom's Daughter Is My Ex "First Kiss Manifesto"



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A Day in the Life of the Future Couple

Night Chat

This happened back during the summer vacation of eighth grade. After finishing dinner, I went back to my room, flopped on my bed, and heaved a long sigh as I recollected my first date.

I'd gone to the festival with Irido-kun in my yukata. That's literally exactly what happened, but somehow, I still couldn't wrap my head around the reality of it all. How could I?

It hadn't even been ten days since I became able to even *talk* to him. So how had I managed to go on a date with him to a festival already? Was this a result of some stochastic variable—a lucky roll of the dice?! Plus...

"Heh heh..." My face pressed against my pillow, a gross smile unbecoming of me creeping across it.

After I'd gotten lost, I'd called Irido-kun and sobbed until he found me. My usual negative thinking made me sure that he would hate me after all that, but what did he say? "You can bother me all you like."

Oh my god, I love him. I love him so, so, so, so much! I excitedly kicked my legs against the bed. People really *could* fall hard for someone in a short period of time. Until just a little bit ago, I'd seen him as my academic rival. But now, whenever I thought about him, my heart would pound, my knees would go weak, and my mind would go blank. *I want to see him. I want to talk to him.*

We wouldn't be able to meet at the library for two more days because he apparently had other obligations. *I can see him again in just a couple days...* Just as I thought that, my eyes landed on my phone next to my pillow. Then, as if a light bulb lit up in my brain... *If I really want to talk to him, then what's stopping me? I have his number.*

But then I got worried. *Is it okay for me to call him? Maybe I'll just be a bother. It's already nighttime, so calling him might be annoying.* But then I remembered our date. *I was a lot more annoying back then and he forgave me. So it should be okay...right? It's just a phone call, after all...*

I hesitantly reached for my phone, but at that exact moment, before my fingers had even made contact, it began to ring.

"Wah—"

I hadn't customized anything yet, so it was still the default

ringtone. I grabbed my phone in a panic to see who could be calling me.

“I-Irido-kun?!” *Huh? Why? Why is he calling me at this exact moment? Can he read my mind?!*

How was it possible that the exact person I wanted to talk with had called me at the exact time I was about to call him? Th-This must have been the stochastic variable at play again. God had personally seen to it that the coin landed on heads every time. What would happen when the other shoe dropped? I was terrified to even think about it.

Either way, right now, I need to answer the phone. He might hang up if I take too long to answer!

“HEL— Hello?” I was too excited; the first syllable practically exploded out of my mouth. Fortunately, I was able to self-correct so that in the end, I only sounded like I’d been startled awake. *Agh, why am I so bad at controlling my volume? I’m so useless!*

“Hel...lo?” The quality of his voice wasn’t great. *Is his connection bad?* “Can...you talk?”

“Y-Yeah! I can talk. I’m completely free! I have *absolutely* nothing to do!” I got the feeling I was kind of overdoing it. *Calm down!* In an attempt to hide how desperate I was, I quickly tried to move the conversation forward. “Wh-What’s up? D-Do you need something?”

“No... Nothing in particular.”

“Oh, I see...”

“Yeah, I just kinda...wanted to talk with you, Ayai.”

“Hyeh?!” I was so surprised by his words that a strange sound escaped my lips. *H-He wants to t-talk with m-me? Me?! Why?! For what reason?!* “O-Oh, me...me too.” *Don’t lose yourself. Push on the gas!* “I... I was thinking about calling you too, Irido-kun.” *I did it! I said it! Go me!*

“Oh. Then...perfect timing, I guess.”

“Y-Yeah, totally! Ehe heh heh.”

It was late at night, I was alone in my room, and yet...I could hear Irido-kun’s breathing from the phone as if he were right next to me... Was it really okay for me to be this happy?

After that, we had a long conversation about a few topics: what books we were reading and new arrivals at the library. Due to our lack of friends, we couldn’t really talk about anything else, but even so, our conversation never dried up.

“I really think that the period of time in which mystery authors try to outdo the complexity of each other’s gimmicks is over.”

“Agreed. Nowadays, they focus more on the logic and wits of the characters. They also try to make the settings more unique—”

Just as he said that, I heard the sound of trees rustling in the distance, prompting me to look out the window, but I lived in an

apartment complex so I couldn't exactly see any trees.

"Is it windy outside?" I asked.

"Hm... Yeah, a little." I felt like his answer was a little weird, but I didn't have the time to ask anything because in the next moment...

"Yume? You up? I'm coming in!"

"Hyeh?!" The door to my bedroom opened and in came my mom. I panicked and hid under my covers, clutching my phone against my chest to hide it. "Wh-What do you need?"

"I'm here to take your garbage."

"You could at least *knock*!"

"Why? You've never told me to before. Are you in your rebellious phase?"

Th-That was close. If she found out I was talking with a boy at night, she'd tease me for the rest of my life. She collected the trash out of my wastebasket and looked like she was going to leave, but...

"Hm? What's this tissue doing over here?" she said, reaching under my desk to pick up a used tissue...while I was still on the phone with Irido-kun. "How many times do I have to tell you to properly throw out your trash? I bet you were lazing around on your bed when you tried to throw this out. Why would you do that when you have no aim?"

"Ah! Ahhhh!" *How could she say that?! Irido-kun might be listening!* I stuffed my phone under the covers and jumped off my bed.

"I wasn't lazing or anything! That tissue just fell out by accident!"

"Hm, I don't know, Yume. You can be a slob. Remember in the bathroom, you left a—"

"Shut up!!! If you're done, get out of my room!!!"

"You really are in your rebellious phase! I never thought this day would come!"

I pushed my mom out of my room, thumping her with my fists, before she could bring up the worst possible thing for Irido-kun to hear. I quickly returned to my bed and fearfully pressed the phone against my ear.

"S-Sorry... My mom came..."

"Don't worry about it."

"Did... Did you hear anything?" If he had, that'd probably spell the end for our relationship. I loved my mom, but if she was the cause of our breakup, I'd probably hate her forever. I might declare my rebellious phase to her face, in fact. But as I steeled myself to hear the answer I dreaded, I was met with an unexpected response.

"Nope... I didn't hear a thing."

"O-Oh..." *Thank god!* But just as I heaved a sigh of relief, he continued.

"I think I heard some kind of rhythmic beating noise in the

beginning.”

“Huh?” Then I remembered what I’d done. I’d panicked and hidden under my covers, holding my phone against my chest. I’d held my phone *against my chest*. Against my chest... Did that mean that the microphone had been pressed right up next to my heart? Did that mean I’d sent him sounds of my beating heart in real time?! “A-Ah... Ahhhhhh!!!”

“W-Wait, it’s fine! If anything, I should apologize for listening!”

“Y-You weren’t bothered by it...?”

“Well... It was like I could tell you were alive. I could feel your existence. Thinking about it like that made me feel relieved. Oh god, I must sound like such a creep. I’m sorry!”

I groaned—not because I thought he was a creep, but because I was so embarrassed! How could having your heartbeat heard be so embarrassing?! It was even worse than someone seeing your panties. It was like the deepest parts of me had been looked into.

“Y-You didn’t think it was weird...?”

“Nope. If anything, I was worried, because it was a little fast.”

“Ahh...”

“B-But it’s completely normal in that situation! Completely normal! Not weird at all!”

Wow, he’s comforting me. He’s so nice. I love him so much!

“You’re doing your best, Ayai. You should be more confident,” he suddenly whispered.

It caught me so off guard that I dove under my covers. In the darkness, I could only hear the sound of Irido-kun’s breathing. Maybe that’s why my next words flowed out so naturally.

“Could you...say that again?”

“You’re doing your best.”

“Mmhmm.”

“I’m proud of you.”

“Mmhmm!”

“Also... Huh, this is becoming like one of those weird motivational videos.”

“Heh heh...” As I giggled, I could hear Irido-kun laughing with me.

He wasn’t anywhere near me, and I couldn’t see him, but it felt like we were right next to each other.

“Hey, Ayai?”

“Hm? What’s the matter?” *Why did he say my name out of the blue?*

“Never mind...” It sounded like he was hesitating. “My phone’s about to die.”

“Oh, I see...” Our dreamlike time together was about to end. I really didn’t want it to, but I couldn’t let myself show that. “I’m going

to do my best, Irido-kun. Would it be okay if...we talked again sometime?"

"Yeah, of course. I'm pretty sure I'll be able to go to the library the day after tomorrow."

"I can't wait. I'll be there."

"Okay then..."

"Yeah..."

"Night..."

"Talk to you later..."

There was a strange reluctant silence for a few seconds before we hung up. I looked at my phone in a daze and saw that our call had lasted for forty-three minutes and forty-five seconds on August 12th at 7:57 pm.

I hope he comes to the library early... I felt so much more strongly than I had forty-three minutes prior. He could've charged his phone while we talked...

The Ex-Couple Wants Stimulation

“Don’t call me ‘hot.’”

“Mizuto-kun, do you know where the bookmark that came with this is?” Yume asked.

It was the afternoon, and we were currently in the living room, reading. I reluctantly stopped and looked up to see that she was holding the book that I’d lent her. *What bookmark?*

“Oh... Yeah, I guess there was a bookmark in there. It’s probably somewhere on my desk.”

“It’s somewhere in that mess? Why didn’t you just leave it in the book?”

“My bad. I didn’t use it at all. I’ll look for it later, so—”

“Not later, *now!* You’re gonna forget about it otherwise.”

“Ugh. I don’t wanna.”

“Huh? Be responsible. Be more thoughtful about the condition of the things you lend out!”

“Yeah, yeah.” I let out a sigh and got up off the couch. *You’re right. I get it already.*

I decided to find it quickly and get back to reading, but just as I was about to leave the living room, I felt two pairs of eyes on the two of us. Yuni-san and dad were home due to a rare day off and were sitting at the dining table, holding back laughter.

“Is...something wrong?” Yume asked.

Yuni-san snorted a little before answering. “Well, it’s just...”

“Yeah, I completely understand.” Dad nodded, his shoulders shaking with laughter.

Yume and I tilted our heads in confusion. We had no idea what exactly was so funny about the current situation.

Yuni-san laughed even harder. “The two of you are acting like a couple getting out of your honeymoon phase.”

The two of us shivered a little. Yuni-san had been referring to the part of a relationship when you’ve been together for long enough that you get stuck in a rut and start focusing on the parts of your partner that you can’t stand. Depending on the couple, you may end up breaking up. Every couple, married or not, dreads this.

“I’m surprised,” Yume said, firmly pressing her cushion against the floor.

We were currently holding an emergency meeting in her room to

discuss the unexpected situation that'd arisen.

"I'd thought that getting used to living here would've eliminated any unnatural behaviors. I can't believe it actually brought up new problems," Yume lamented.

"Thinking about what they said... Our behavior really was like a legit couple. I doubt that anyone pretending would give off the same vibes."

"Only we're not a real couple anymore!"

"Yeah, exactly. So it's a problem that we're being seen as one."

Of course, dad and Yuni-san had just been joking around. They had no clue that we used to date. I couldn't deny that after living together for four months, I'd become a little lax and unguarded. Our conversation in the living room hadn't exactly been one of two stepsiblings getting along, but of a couple getting out of their honeymoon phase, or maybe even of real siblings.

It was completely possible for someone to find the way we were acting odd for people who'd supposedly only just met each other.

"It seems there's a need to recall how we felt when we first moved in together," Yume said with a sour look on her face. "We need to bring back the tenseness we had four months ago."

"Well, whether we'll be able to fool our parents or not, it doesn't change the fact that you've been letting your guard down in general. You call me at night like it's the most natural thing in the world. And you walk around like you own the place in skimpy clothes."

"Th-They're not skimpy! I'm dressed more lightly because it's summer!"

Yume gripped the cushion against her body as if to cover herself while backing away from me. She was currently wearing an oversized shirt, short culottes, and knee socks. Despite making a big fuss about not showing off her bare legs in public, half of her thighs were basically on full display. Plus, the bagginess of her shirt made it so that if she bent over, her cleavage could easily be seen...not that I was looking. I wasn't.

Plus, she was wearing glasses. She usually had contacts in, but since she wasn't going out as much, she'd gotten lazy and wore glasses most of the time. Her outfit really reminded me of how she was in middle school, and that was *not* great for my mental health.

"You're giving me a weird look." She glared at me through the lenses of her glasses. She lifted her knees, flashing her thighs—probably on purpose—but I quickly looked away.

"Anyway, you weren't so chill about your outfit in front of me four months ago. It just kinda seems like you've slipped back into how you were in middle school..."

"Arggh, fine! Shut up already! We just have to find a way to get

over this 'post-honeymoon phase' thing, right?!"

"Have you been hearing what I've been saying? We're not dating. There is no 'post-honeymoon phase' thing. Or wait... Could we use that as a model case?"

"A what?"

"We'll use the method that couples use to overcome this stage in their relationships as a way to get our tenseness back."

"Oh, okay... You have a point. That may be a good place to start since we don't know what to do," Yume mumbled while pressing her thumb against her bottom lip. "But how should we go about it?"

"..."

"Why aren't you saying anything?"

"I was just remembering that we broke up precisely because we *couldn't* get past that stage in our relationship."

"True..."

We'd fit the description of this stage perfectly. We'd found parts of each other that we hated and couldn't stop noticing them. We hadn't had a name for this back in the day, but last summer was precisely our post-honeymoon phase. It had been so uneventful, though, that I had a hard time remembering it.

"We'll just have to borrow someone else's wisdom," she finally said.

"Whose?"

"The internet's."

"Wait... Whenever you had a problem with me, did you always go straight to the internet?"

"N-No! Of course not!"

Her shifting eyes told a different story. It all made sense now why she did weird things occasionally.

Yume pulled out her phone and said "overcome the post-honeymoon phase" into it, without even a shred of shame or embarrassment. But then again, we had nowhere else to turn, so neither of us had the luxury of feeling embarrassed.

"Let's see..." she said, scrolling through the search results.

"Anything?"

"The post-honeymoon phase of a relationship typically starts after the first three months," she read out loud. *That's like right when you're on the best terms with each other.* "In order to overcome this stage, you must reconfirm your feelings for one another." She glanced at me through her glasses. *What do you want me to say?*

"I'm looking for a precise method, not pretentious statements."

"There you go, making a beeline straight for the conclusion. I really hate that about you."

"Oh wow, look, you *are* able to reconfirm your feelings! I think we

just overcame our issues.”

“All we did was jump straight into ‘full-blown hatred!’” Yume sighed and looked back at her phone. “‘Method one: go on a date somewhere you don’t usually go.’”

I fell silent. A *date*? Here we were trying to make it so that dad and Yuni-san wouldn’t think of us as a couple, and yet the first method listed was a couple’s activity. *Hm...*

“What do you think?” Yume hugged her cushion against her, lay her legs to the side, and tilted her head while shooting me a glance. “Do you...want to go on a date?”

As much as I wanted to immediately laugh in her face, I agreed that we’d been a little too comfortable and lax recently.

“Where to? Where’s a place that we don’t usually go?”

“If we can’t go to a bookstore or the library then... Oh, I guess we only went there together in middle school.”

She had a point. We’d only ever really gone to those two places when we were dating. We hardly went there together now that we were living together. Then again, if we couldn’t go places that we usually went together, then...

“As long as we don’t stay home or go to school, we could go anywhere.”

“True...”

Since we were together at home and at school, it was completely possible that we’d gotten sick of each other. So maybe a change in scenery would work out.

“Hm... I see...” Yume mumbled to herself while swiping through her phone. *You see what exactly?* “This might be a good place.”

“Where?”

“If we can go anywhere aside from home or school, then I might have a good place. There’s something I’ve been wanting to buy, so you can tag along.”

“Something you want to buy?” *Something other than a book? Can’t be summer clothes. It’s a little late for that.*

Yume rested her chin on the top of the cushion she was holding and then bent her lips into a teasing smile. “A swimsuit.”

“I’m gonna stop by the bookstore.”

“Okay, don’t let the heat get to you.”

“Have fun.”

Neither dad nor Yuni-san had even an inkling that I was lying to them. It’s nice to be known as a person who only goes to a few places. I walked out of the house and made my way to the nearest corner of the street. *It’s so friggin’ hot.*

I looked up at the summer sky from the shade of a telephone pole

while the sound of cicadas filled my ears. It felt like I was walking through a sauna. I could slowly feel myself being roasted alive. I needed to get to an air-conditioned store *immediately*.

I'd been told to leave first because she needed to change, but I was starting to think she wanted me to die from heatstroke.

"Hey. Are you still alive?"

Just as I began to think that, Yume popped out from around the corner. I was sure that she'd be wearing her usual "rich girl" clothes, but was completely taken aback by her actual outfit. I had no clue who she was at first.

If I was to put her look today into one word, it'd be "dynamic." She was wearing a white shirt, jean shorts, and black thigh highs. It was a lot more revealing an outfit than I'd ever expected her to wear. The sleeves of her shirt barely covered her shoulders, and even the collar was deep, revealing her collarbone. Plus, her thighs were peeking out from the space between her shorts and thigh highs. The elastic band around them was slightly digging into her skin too.

However, the most dangerous part of her outfit to me was above her neck. I wasn't sure whether she was wearing it as a way to keep the sun out, but she was wearing a wide brim hat, and her annoyingly long black hair was tied into low pigtails that hung down in front of her. That was already enough for me to remember the old Yume, but the killing blow was dealt by her glasses. She hadn't taken them off since we were in her room.

"Heh heh." Yume snickered like a kid who'd pulled off a prank. "Method two: try surprising them."

I scowled. *I knew it was intentional*. The two low pigtails that hung on her chest, along with her glasses—it was like she'd gone back to the Yume Ayai I'd known in middle school. But then again, looks can be deceiving, and that was definitely the case here.

"It'd be annoying if someone we know saw me, so I'm in disguise. Oh, right... Here." Yume took out a blue baseball cap and presented it to me. *Hm?* "People know you now after you got first on the midterms. This'll help keep you a little more incognito."

"What am I, a celebrity?"

"If you're good with people gossiping about us being on a date, feel free not to wear it."

"Ugh..."

"Also..." Before I could respond, Yume took the hat and forced it onto my head. "The sun's strong today. It'd be annoying if you got heatstroke."

The girl I saw past the brim of the hat may have looked like the Yume Ayai that used to quietly follow me, but it wasn't. Maybe it was because of how she'd grown or the different vibe she gave off with her

new clothes...or maybe it was how she'd grown mentally. Either way, I had no intention of being her younger brother.

"Fine..."

"Good boy."

I pulled the hat down to cover my eyes, and I thought we'd get going at this point, but Yume gave me a nervous look.

"What? Is there something else?"

"Well, uh... Yeah, there is one more thing..." She reached into her bag and brought out a certain item. Glasses. "I'm wearing a disguise, so... You should too."

"No."

"Why?! You'd look so hot!"

Don't call me "hot."

We walked ten or so minutes under the scorching sun before we decided to take a bus and get out of the heat. Even though there was a mall close to where we lived, it counted as a place that we'd normally go to, so it wouldn't help us regain our tenseness. We needed to go somewhere new for that.

I had to focus on keeping our objective in mind, otherwise this excursion would end up being nothing more than me accompanying her on a shopping trip.

"So, why are you buying a swimsuit? Going to the beach or something?" I asked Yume as cool air blew across my body from the entrance of the mall.

"No," she replied, patting down her neck with a handkerchief. "I thought Akatsuki-san would want to go to the beach, but she said she wants to avoid unsolicited advances. Plus, it's kinda far."

"Oh, I see..."

"Feel better now, sister lover?" Yume asked, leaning in front of me and gazing into my eyes.

For some reason, even though I didn't react whatsoever, she giggled at me in a mocking manner. *If I'm not careful, she might act high and mighty like this all day...*

"Then why do you need a swimsuit?" I asked, trying to get back my momentum.

"Why?" Yume turned her gaze towards a store window. "Mineaki-jisan said I might need one for Obon."

"Dad did? For Obon... Oh, that's more of a river than an ocean, though."

I forgot that we were going to dad's hometown to celebrate Obon this year. The house we were currently living in originally belonged to my grandfather. Unfortunately, I never met him, because he passed away before I was born.

Dad grew up in our house, but my grandmother lived somewhere

else now. It was tradition to make a yearly visit to her during Obon. Naturally, we were going back this year too, especially now that our family of two had doubled.

My grandmother lived in the middle of nowhere. The only thing you could really amuse yourself with was playing in the river. It was like being in an unexplored region of the world.

That being said, I never did any of that stuff when I was growing up. I'd always make a beeline for the bookcase that my great-grandfather had left. Thinking back, this was probably what led me to reading all types of books instead of just a single genre.

The fact that the swimsuit she was buying was for that river connected the dots explaining why she came with me instead of Higashira or Minami-san. It would've been weird to invite people to go shopping for swimsuits if nobody but her needed one.

"I never thought I'd see the day that a high school girl would go out of her way to buy a new swimsuit to play in the river," I said, fake-pitying her. "This is so sad. I might cry."

"What's wrong with rivers? They're more fun than playing at the beach, which is way too crowded."

"You've got a point, but you're gonna be around family. You could just wear what you did last year instead of buying a brand-new one."

"Are you making fun of me right now?" Yume leered at me, one arm wrapped around her belly.

"Huh?"

"You said that with my proportions from last year in mind, didn't you?"

"...Oh." My eyes inadvertently fell to her chest.

The white shirt she was wearing was puffed out in the chest area by mounds that hadn't existed last year. Well, actually, it's possible that her chest was already pretty big last summer. I wouldn't know, though, since we'd had a fight before summer vacation started and didn't really meet up.

"You're looking too much..." Yume covered her chest with both arms and took a step back from me. "What's up with you today? Are you okay? Are you in heat or something? Am I going to be safe trying on swimsuits? You won't barge in and assault me?"

"Hell no. I'm not that ravenous a person. If I was, Higashira would never be safe with me."

"I *really* hate to admit it, but you have a point..."

This was the first time I thought it was good that Higashira was as unguarded as she was.

"Either way, do your best not to stare at me with those lecherous eyes of yours. This isn't your own personal peep show," she said, returning to her original distance from me.

“A ‘show’? You in a swimsuit, a ‘show’? Wow, someone’s got a lot of confidence. I’m in awe at how much stock you put in yourself.”

She growled, angrily kicking my calf as we arrived at the store.

The first mannequin we saw had on a bikini that would only be appropriate on a Brazilian beach. There was no way that a thigh-highs-in-summer girl like Yume would wear it.

“Sorry to interrupt you while you’re so passionately gazing at it but... No. Not happening. My butt would hang out.”

“I know. Did I say I wanted you to wear that? We don’t know what kind of people would see you...”

“So it’s okay as long as nobody else is around?”

“I never said that.”

“Mm-hmm...”

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

“I was just thinking of a guy who complained about his girlfriend’s wonderful miniskirt.”

You still remember that? Sheesh...

“All right. Let’s get going and find a swimsuit that won’t arouse a certain someone’s gross possessiveness,” Yume said smugly.

I growled. I was this close to snapping and killing her on the spot, but before I could, a wild saleswoman appeared!

“Can I help you find something?” the saleswoman asked in a high-pitched voice, with a too-perfect smile plastered across her face as we entered the store. She reminded me of a robot programmed for customer service. *Now I understand the uncanny valley hypothesis...*

It might have been a little mean of me since she was just doing her job, but I could only see her as a monster in a dungeon. The only two options in my head were “fight” or “run.” Just as I was about to run, the girl next to me took a brave step towards the monster.

“Um, I’m looking for a swimsuit.”

“A bikini or a one-piece?”

“I think I’ll start with a one-piece...something that isn’t so revealing,” Yume said while shooting me a look.

The saleswoman didn’t waste a single second, immediately noticing the look Yume gave me. Her smile widened to the point that it was basically sparkling.

“You could go for a bikini too. There are skirt types that you could choose from. I’m sure it’ll put your boyfriend’s mind at ease.”

“Huh?”

Huh?

“U-Um, h-he’s not my—”

“Let’s get to looking then! May I ask for your sizes?”

“Huh? Wait. Sizes?” Yume’s face went red, her eyes flitting back and forth between me and the saleswoman, before whispering

something into her ears.

The saleswoman nodded in understanding. “Got it! I’ll be *right* back,” she said before quickly disappearing into the back of the store.

Yume squeezed her red ears and exhaled. “I panicked. Who asks that kind of question?!”

“You can deal with store people now? I totally thought you were the type of person who’d choke.”

“I am. I am, but I did my best to work through it. Girls have to be conscious of their outfits, unlike a certain someone who puts *absolutely* no thought into what they have on.”

I had nothing I could say to that. All I could do was remember the first time I saw her in her street clothes. She’d barely ever hung out with friends, but despite that, she’d come in completely normal-looking clothes. I’d been surprised. She was working hard, even when I wasn’t looking. Not that it mattered anymo—

“Did you see? Did you?!”

“I did! So cute! Omigosh, high school couples are so bittersweet.”

Both of us fell silent. *Can’t you salespeople talk somewhere where we can’t hear you?!*

Thanks to that, we were left in a weird mood as we awkwardly gazed at the swimsuits on the racks and the passersby outside. After not too long, the saleswoman came back.

“Thank you for waiting! I brought you a swimsuit I think you’ll love! Let me know if you need a different size, okay? Oh, and if you’d like to try it on, please be sure to keep your underwear on,” she said, giving Yume a swimsuit while shooting me a weird look for some reason.

As she walked back to the register, I wondered what that look meant. It was as if she had been saying “good luck” or something. But why?

“Um... I guess I’ll try it on then.” Yume shot me a quick glance, holding the swimsuit against her body. “Do you...want to see it?”

“What’s wrong with the mirror in there?” *Why would you want me to look?*

“Th-This is the first time I’m buying a swimsuit. I need feedback!”

“So what? You’re gonna buy a swimsuit I like?”

“Well... O-Of course I’d buy the *opposite* of what you like. Why would I ever buy a swimsuit that *you* liked?!”

Oh, good. That’s a relief. “Okay... I guess it’d be awkward to stand around out here by myself anyway.”

“Exactly! You look so out of place.”

“Remind me, who dragged me here?”

Yume disappeared behind the curtains of one of the fitting rooms. I sat on a stool to wait for her. *Swimsuits...* We’d had swimming classes

back in middle school, but our high school didn't even have a pool. Thanks to that, I'd thought I'd never have to endure the sight of her in a swimsuit. But now...

From behind the curtains, I heard the sound of clothes rustling, being removed, and dropping to the floor. The sound of something being unzipped was especially loud and distinct. How could people feel comfortable taking off their clothes behind one thin piece of cloth like this? How could *she* feel comfortable when I was just on the other side?

I'd had good luck up until now because I'd never once run into Yume while she was in the middle of changing. Technically, I'd run into her when she was getting out of the bath, but that... What I accidentally saw back then—the pure white skin and curves... *Stop*. I erased the image forming in the back of my head. *I'm not a horny middle schooler*.

I'd been living with her for four months already. Her changing in front of me shouldn't have bothered me in the slightest. As I tried to clear my mind, the sound of clothes rustling stopped, and about ten seconds later, Yume's head poked out from behind the curtains, her glasses still on.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Is... Is anyone around?" Yume asked, anxiously glancing around.

I could hear people in the mall, but there wasn't anyone nearby except us... Well, I could feel the salespeople watching us, but that was about it. Besides, they weren't positioned at an angle where they could see anything.

"Nope. But why does it matter? If you're gonna wear that in public, you shouldn't be embarrassed from just trying it on."

"Sh-Shut up! I-I've never exposed my skin this much... In fact, thinking about it logically, I'm pretty much parading around in my underwear..."

"The longer you take, the higher the chance that someone comes is."

"Don't rush me! Do you want to see me in my swimsuit *that* bad?!"

"I'm the type who prefers to get the annoying stuff out of the way as fast as possible."

"Y-You— I'm gonna make you cry!"

She flung the curtains open. My gaze shot to her porcelain thighs stretching out of the pure-white skirt she had on. Raising my eyes, I was met with her bare stomach. In the middle of her waist, which was almost worryingly thin, was her tiny belly button.

Looking up further, I saw a white piece of cloth with a floral pattern. Her two low pigtails, which cast a shadow across her ribs, lay

across the two mounds on her chest. I was surprised how large they were, given her thin physique.

Finally, there was her face. She was pursing her lips as if she was holding something back. Seeing her glasses reminded me of her middle school self, but lowering my vision to the *valley* below created a conflict in my head that was difficult to resolve. I could feel my head spinning.

“What...do you think?” She bashfully rubbed her thighs together while looking at me through her glasses.

No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t reconcile the nostalgia of her bespectacled face with her scantily clad body. Ayai did not have the most attractive body. Even when we’d kissed and hugged, I’d get a little worked up, but I never once thought about touching her chest or butt. But right now... *This... This is impossible...*

“Uh...” It took me longer than I’d like to admit to get my brain functioning and producing words. “Not bad...I think.”

“Y-You *think*?! That’s not good enough. I need more of a compliment than that!”

“More than that...?”

Yume turned to where she’d left her bag and rummaged around in it before pulling out her phone and shoving it into my face.

“Method three: find parts of your partner you like and compliment them.”

“Geh.” *Even this was part of her calculations?!*

If I refused, it’d make this outing effectively pointless. Wait, had she suddenly asked me to go shopping with her just to humiliate me like this?!

“Cat got your tongue? Tell me what you like about me, Mizuto-kun,” Yume said with a faint but triumphant smile.



My eyes once again soaked in the sight of Yume's body wrapped in a white bikini. Her long, thick, pristinely pale legs protruded from under the skirt. There weren't any signs of pores on them. I had no doubt that there were a lot of women out there who'd kill for her legs.

Following her legs upwards, past her peach-shaped butt, my eyes were immediately reunited with her tight waist. How could girls have such thin waists? I could've sworn that it hadn't changed even a bit from when we were in middle school. Also, how could she be so small there yet so large in other places? Her chest and butt were comparatively larger than her slender waist. I struggled to understand how she was able to keep her balance all the time.

This brought me to the *biggest* difference in her body between now and middle school—her breasts. Perhaps swimsuits in general were made to have this kind of effect, or maybe it was just the one that she was wearing, but her breasts looked a lot larger than usual. She had a very visible line of cleavage, over which her pigtails flowed like a river.

When I'd hugged her back in middle school, it'd felt like chest-bumping a brick wall. If I did that now, I doubt I could press my whole body against her. Complimenting her on anything felt like it'd be a form of sexual harassment. I frantically tried to look for something that didn't mention her bulging chest, her slender waist, or her long legs. I needed something neutral. Was there anything I could talk about that didn't have to do with her appearance?!

"I..." After racking my brain for an answer, I was finally able to squeeze out the words I'd been looking for. "I like how much you care about your family."

"Huh?" Yume's face froze. Her eyes fixed on me and her mouth was left half-open, but there was a slight twitch in her cheek...or at least that's what I'd expected. Instead, her eyes were darting left and right, her lips were trembling, and she was holding her cheeks with both her hands. "Wh-Why are you complimenting my personality?!"

"What other choice do I have?! Finding something good about you in a swimsuit would be social suicide!"

"Wha—" Yume's face flushed, and she bumped into the mirror as she backed away from me, all while covering her stomach and chest with her arms. "Y-You pervert! Horndog! You could've just complimented the design of the swimsuit! You could've said that the color matches me! *That's* what you could've said!"

"Oh... Good point..." I was filled with so much regret. The saleswoman had picked out the swimsuit, so I'd taken the option of complimenting the choice itself out of the equation.

Yume pulled the curtains around her body and leered at me from

behind them. "Now I know *exactly* how you look at me."

"You're the one who told me to look!"

"I-I didn't tell you to ogle m-my body! Also, that's not what I meant..."

"Huh?"

"Forget it!" Yume retreated behind the curtain.

I rested my face in my hand, unable to accept what'd just happened. What was she so unhappy about? I fulfilled the request to compliment her. Plus, why was it only me that she...

"Hey," I said, an idea formulating.

"H-Huh? I-I'm kind of in the middle of changing..."

"We're looking for a way to get back our tenseness, right? That's a two-way street. Shouldn't you find a compliment for me too?"

"What?" The sound of her changing stopped. The only sound for a little bit was from the people in the mall. "I-I guess... Even with all that's happened, you've stuck with me until the end...or something." Her voice was so low that it should have gotten lost in the sound of the mall, but I definitely heard it.

My hand left my jaw and covered my mouth. *Now who's the one complimenting personalities?* I really thought she would've said something like "You look good in glasses."

"Oh, I see. Now I know exactly how *you* look at *me*."

"What's that supposed to mean?!"

"That you... Well, you see me as a really convenient and easy to handle person."

"If you're easy to handle, the entire human race is easy to handle!"

Don't deny it. Rude. After that, I kept my mouth shut and waited for Yume to finish changing. Ultimately, it took her a lot more time to change back into her clothes than out of them, but at long last, Yume came out of the fitting room.

"I'm...gonna go check out."

"So you like it?"

"I guess. Yes. *I* like it."

The way she emphasized "I" was unnecessary. Why else would she buy clothes if she didn't like them? I walked with Yume to the register and watched her give the swimsuit to the saleswoman who'd picked it out for her. As she did, the tag on it caught my eye.

9M? I took out my phone to research this befuddling combination of number and letter. I'd never seen it before. Apparently, 9M for a top meant that it was eighty-three centimeters. So a C or D cup. *Hm...*

"Um, sorry." Yume leaned over the counter and spoke to the saleswoman in a low voice. "It was a little tight around the chest..."

"Oh, really? I guess you're a bigger size than you thought."

Immediately after that, I entered a state of self-effacement, but was eventually snapped out of it by a loud “Thank you very much!” from the saleswoman, her smile still unnaturally wide.

Yume took the bag with her swimsuit in it from the saleswoman. Seeing this, I held out my hand to her.

“Hmph,” I begrudgingly grunted.

“Huh?”

“Give it. I’ll hold it.”

Yume’s eyes fell to the bag that she was holding against her chest.

“Wh-What’s gotten into you? Why are you acting like a gentleman?”

“I see you backing away from me. Stop. I’m just thinking about the balance aspect of all of this. You have a purse to worry about, but I’m empty-handed.”

“Ah...”

This was starting to get annoying, so I snatched the bag from her. It only had a swimsuit in it, so I might as well have been holding air. I immediately moved to walk out of the shop and Yume hurried to catch up. Now we both had something in our hands.

“Hm... Balance.”

“What?”

“No, it’s just that... If you’re thinking about our collective balance, you see the two of us as a pair...”

I stayed silent in order to make sure I chose my words carefully. “Of course I do. We’re walking together. We’re not related by blood, but we’re still technically siblings.”

“Just siblings?”

“*Just* siblings.”

“Right... Of course.”

The mall was packed with people, probably because it was summer vacation. We had to be careful not to get separated, but it’s not like we needed to hold hands. At least, I didn’t think we needed to. This only reaffirmed how we felt about each other.

“Time to head back?”

“Yeah, let’s go home.”

“Did we get the tenseness back?”

“At the very least, I know that you look at me with lecherous eyes.”

“I told you... You were the one who told me to look.”

Yume quietly giggled. Even without turning to look at her, I knew exactly what kind of expression she had on. She’d put her hand against her mouth and was glancing at me, a soft smile forming on her face.

We were a couple, and then we became siblings. I knew way too much about the different faces she'd make. There was no need for me to look at her face, never mind hold hands. Her voice, her appearance, her very existence—it had become all too natural that she was by my side.

It probably seemed like we were still in the post-honeymoon stage. Whether we were being called a couple by the saleswoman or at the dinner table with our parents, there wasn't any real difference.

"How about stopping by a bookstore on the way home?"

"Oh yeah, I did wanna pick up a book while we're out."

"You have absolutely no intention of stepping one foot outside of your grandmother's house, do you?"

Just like that, the two of us walked to the bookstore without holding hands. That was perfectly fine.

We got home in the evening. The summer sky looked like it'd been stained red. One by one, we stepped over the shadows of the telephone poles in our path.

"Since we left the house at different times, should we arrive home at different times too?" I asked.

"It shouldn't matter. We can just say that we ran into each other on the way home."

"True... We shouldn't draw too much attention to ourselves."

Compared to the mall that had been bursting with people, out here, basically nobody was around. From the houses on either side of us, we could hear the sounds of children playing and food being prepared. The only shadows cast by people were mine and Yume's.

I started to suppress memories that were trying to resurface back to the depths of my brain. I didn't need them. Not anymore. We were managing. Everything would be solved by time and acclimation. We could live a...well, a not-so-new life without looking back on our dark past—our middle school years.

We'd already spent four months as siblings. The time for doubt had passed. We were siblings who used to date. The past was the past. We needed to focus on the present. Even if we had two titles—exes and siblings—they didn't encroach on each other. I understood that. I understood, but...

"Ah..." Yume suddenly stopped moving about one step ahead of me.

"This is..."

We'd stopped at where we used to say goodbye before going home. We barely walked this way now that we were in high school. And...

In what could only be described as a folly of youth, I had a so-

called girlfriend during eighth and ninth grade.

The sunset staining the way home. The fork in the road leading to our respective houses. Ayai's slightly red face. A soft sensation left on my lips. These memories flashed in my head one after another. A bespectacled Yume looked up at me from a distance closer than what I remembered from my memories. Right at that moment, a cool wind blew across us, almost sending Yume's hat flying.

"Ah—" We both reacted.

I quickly stuck out my hand, but so did Yume. As a result, our hands overlapped one another's. It was the first time that our hands had touched today. The smooth and cold sensation of her hand ran across my fingers. It was as if electricity was running through them.

Everything was in my head. I was dreaming. Hadn't I already figured that out a mere four months ago? I had a different thought back then. When dad told me about his remarriage, I thought that even at his age, it was impossible to stop dreaming. So if it was impossible at his age, then for high schoolers like us...

Suddenly, I felt the squeeze of Yume's hand closing around mine. There shouldn't have been any reason for us to hold hands, but I felt her hand firmly squeezing mine. Like she didn't want me to let go. Then she took off her hat with her free hand.

This close, I could see her face really well. It was colored red from the sunset. She looked at me as if she was waiting for something.

"Method four... Show your feelings through your actions."

That one's easy. I've done that over and over and over and over again. If anything... A year ago, everything fell apart because I *hadn't* done that.

Yume closed her eyes. I took a step towards her and bent down a little. It was simple. It was really so simple. It would've been so simple one year ago.

"Ow!" Yume held her forehead in confusion after I flicked it. "What was that for?!"

"Method two: try surprising them."

"Wha—" Yume grew bright red to her ears and began shaking.

I ignored my little stepsister and began walking home.

"Y-You— Right now, you were totally—"

"I did *exactly* what you said. I showed my feelings through my actions."

"And what feelings were those exactly?!"

How am I supposed to know? But in that moment, I had been thinking about how if we'd continued...it might have meant reconciliation a year ago, but doing it now just meant we would get dragged back by unresolved feelings.

It'd be as if we were getting rid of everything we'd gone through

—the half year of the post-honeymoon phase, the decision to break up, becoming stepsiblings, and me rejecting Isana Higashira. Even if we did that, though, we couldn't go back in time. I had no regrets.

The reason I rejected Isana Higashira wasn't that I was still hung up on my ex. I had no reason to think about my past relationship at all—I shouldn't have had one, at least, but we were family now. Family that was returning to the same home.

“Mizuto-kun, here's the book you lent me yesterday.”

“Oh. How was it?”

“Good. I thought it'd be really character-driven, but it really went in-depth on the mystery solving.”

“Yeah, I thought it'd be right up your alley, Yume-san.”

“Right. Um...”

“...”

“If you have any other interesting books...”

“Oh. Yeah. Of course.”

We'd successfully gotten back our tenseness. We were acting like stepsiblings who still weren't accustomed to each other, having finally put some distance between the two of us. Thanks to that, our parents had stopped with the “couple” stuff. But...

“You two are acting kind of distant,” dad pointed out.

“Just like a couple that's looking for the right timing to propose!” Yuni-san giggled.

While the two of them laughed, Yume began trembling and shot to her feet. “Argh! What are we supposed to do?! You two keep making it so difficult!”

“Aha ha ha! Sorry! It's just still so weird for me to see you getting along so well with a boy.”

“This'll get you ready for when we go to my mom's house,” dad added. “You're gonna get teased even more. They won't be able to calm down once they find out that Mizuto has a sister now.”

“I don't think I want to go anymore...” Yume sulked.

Ultimately, it was just our oversensitive minds at work. Our parents never truly believed anything they said. They were joking around. I'd like to say that they caused us a lot of trouble, but at the very least, we didn't have anything to worry about anymore. As long as they kept making these jokes, we could stay a family.

“Something wrong?” Yume asked, looking at me.

She wasn't wearing her nostalgia-inducing glasses today, so I wasn't forced to remember the old her. Instead, the image of her in her swimsuit was firmly in my mind.

“Nope...” I said, returning my gaze to the book in front of me.

How much was the past and how much was the present? *I have no*

clue. Good grief...

The Ex-Girlfriend Does Reconnaissance

“Like a couple that’s been living together for three years.”

I thought I heard RADWIMPS playing from the living room, so I poked my head in, only to find Mizuto watching *Your Name*. Finding it curious, I approached my little stepbrother. He was leaning against the back of the couch while gazing at the extremely beautifully drawn Tokyo landscape.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Watching a movie.”

“That’s rare.”

“Not my choice.”

What does that mean? It was almost as if he was implying that someone else had wanted to watch it.

“Oh, Yume-san. Greetings. Pardon the intrusion.” A feminine voice came out from nowhere, causing me to jump. But then I saw an outstretched hand lazily waving from the couch. Laying there was none other than Higashira-san, using Mizuto’s lap as a pillow.

“Higashira-san... What are you doing?”

“Enjoying a film.”

That is not what I’m asking about. She was resting her head on his lap as if it was the most natural thing in the world. *That’s* what I wanted to know about.

“Mizuto-kun revealed to me that he hadn’t experienced *Your Name*. This was a problem that needed prompt correction, so here we are. There shouldn’t be a single person in Japan who hasn’t seen this movie. It is imperative—an absolutely *imperative* educational experience for every citizen in this country.”

“Japan’s education policy has taken a pretty drastic turn...” Mizuto quipped.

“After this, we will immediately transition to *5 Centimeters Per Second*.”

“Not *Weathering With You*?” Mizuto listlessly asked.

Their conversation was so incredibly casual. Mizuto was acting no different than usual while idly playing with her fluffy hair. They were the spitting image of a couple...or maybe a dog and its master. I wasn’t sure which fit better.

I could feel thorny feelings start filling my head. I've had my doubts about their relationship many times before, but right now, it felt like I'd walked in on a date. Was it possible that they were dating and had been lying to us this whole time? Maybe after her confession, they'd ended up getting together, but it was hard to tell us, so they stayed quiet about it... Was that why he hadn't kissed me the other day?

The scene played back over in my head.

"Y-You— Right now, you were totally—" I had said.

"I did *exactly* what you said. I showed my feelings through my actions," he'd replied.

Remembering it only made the thorny, agonizing feelings inside of me well up further. I wanted to clear my mind, so I sat next to Mizuto.

"What're you doing?" Mizuto asked, shooting me a look.

"I'm watching too."

I sat just far enough away that I wasn't anywhere close to touching his lap, shoulder, or even hand. My eyes kept flitting down to Higashira-san.

"I very much enjoy how despite them not conversing with each other directly, they're slowly becoming a bickering couple," Higashira-san commented.

This is a good chance. A certain job had been requested of me. While she was nonchalantly giving her otaku commentary, it was up to me to discern the true nature of their relationship.

"So what's the deal with Higashira-san?" This question had been enthusiastically asked this morning, not by a gossip-loving student, but by Yuni Irido—my mom.

I had been in the midst of checking for new books on my phone.

"Her...deal? What do you mean?" I asked, raising my head.

"Well, she's been over almost every single day since summer break started. I'm just wondering what's the deal with her and Mizuto-kun. Aren't they a little too friendly to be exes?"

Let's back up even further and review how we got here. Due to a poorly phrased statement by Higashira-san, both mom and Mineaki-ojisan came to be under the impression that she was Mizuto's ex. They were both very interested in this sudden development for their son and cornered Higashira-san each time she came over. All they ever managed to do was frighten her, though.

"I agree that they're friendly...unnaturally so..."

"Right? Right?! I've talked it over with Mineaki-san, and we think that maybe she was too embarrassed to say that they're still together, so she lied. Anyway, Yume... Could you do some reconnaissance work for us?"

“Sure... Wait, what?”

I’d reflexively agreed to her request without really listening.

Reconnaissance? Huh?

“Higashira-san is too nervous around us, so since she has her guard down around you, we were thinking that you could maybe talk to her and see what’s what.”

“Wh-Why should I do that?”

“You’re curious too, aren’t you?”

“Well...I guess...”

“Great! Give me the juicy deets later!”

She hadn’t left any chance for me to refuse. *Why couldn’t her aggressiveness have been passed down to me?* I silently cursed my genes.

The two main characters were currently in the midst of a romantic comedy. I hadn’t seen this movie for a while, but if I remembered correctly, I’d seen it right before I’d started dating this guy. Now that I was watching it again, a certain part was really striking a chord with me—the heroine trying to hook the protagonist up with another girl.

I shot a glance at the two next to me. Their expressions were blank as they stared at the screen—not a thought behind their eyes, as far as I could tell. They didn’t look bored. If anything, their lack of expression meant that they were incredibly invested in the story. They really were two peas in a pod.

“Mm... It’s hot...” Higashira-san muttered as she wriggled around on Mizuto’s lap.

When she’d first started coming over, she’d worn the clothes that Akatsuki-san and I had picked out for her. Recently, though, she’d been treating our house like it was her own. Today, she was wearing jeans and a short-sleeved hoodie.

The air conditioning was set at a higher temperature, which may have been uncomfortable for her in that outfit. I reached for the remote to lower the temperature, but before I could... *Zrrrp!* Higashira-san had partially unzipped her hoodie.

“Phew...” Higashira-san sighed, then turned her attention back to the movie.

Not me. I was too distracted by what was underneath her hoodie. She was wearing a *tank top*, of all things! She was practically in her underwear! Akatsuki-san had declared that this type of shirt encroached “slut territory.” It stretched tightly across her skin, giving her well-endowed chest a very clear shape and exposing her pronounced cleavage. And one of her bra straps had even fallen off her shoulder!

I stared at her intensely, getting increasingly annoyed, but Mizuto continued to calmly watch the movie as if nothing was happening. I

didn't want to interrupt him, but that was my only option to warn him about Higashira-san's actions.

Am... Am I the crazy one? Am I missing something? Why didn't she just take her hoodie off? Did she have some kind of plan that involved only unzipping it down to her boobs? Or did she do that because she simply couldn't be bothered to put it back on?

While I was toiling in my thoughts, we'd reached the halfway point in the movie. Mizuto's eyes were now firmly glued to the screen. And then Higashira-san dealt the next blow.

"Mm... Itchy..." Higashira-san mumbled, twisting around before scratching herself.

I initially thought she really was itchy, and that she was innocently moving to make it easier to scratch herself. But I should've known better. *Isana Higashira is a person who always defies expectations.*

Higashira-san slipped her hand down beneath her hoodie and then into her tank top. *Huh? Wh-What are you doing?!* My question was immediately answered by the quiet sound of something unclasping. *No way... I knew that sound. Every girl knew that sound. It was a part of our daily routine. But there was no way...right?*

Even Higashira-san wouldn't do that with Mizuto right there...right? But my hopes and expectations were immediately shot down in the next moment. Higashira-san had stuck her hand towards her chest, under her clothes—no, under her *bra*.

She'd unhooked her bra, stuck her hand right on in, and started *enthusiastically* scratching her boobs! I totally got it—I really did. It gets hot under there. I was empathetic. There were more times than not that I wanted to scratch there, but...*now?!* *There's a guy right there! There are other people here for that matter! So why?! What are you doing?! I hesitate to do that even in front of my mom! I can't believe my eyes...*

"Phew..." Higashira-san sighed once again, and a look of relief spread across her face. Just like that, she moved her hand away and rehooked her bra as if nothing had happened. *I know how relieved you are, but I'm definitely going to lecture you on this later. Count on it.*

I decided to tell Akatsuki-san about it too. *She'd* never dress in clothes that showed her bra—never mind such a messy outfit—in front of a guy. She'd always show up fully dressed. It didn't matter how comfortable she was around them. She'd never do anything like wear only an oversized T-shirt around someone. I knew she'd be on my side. Higashira-san was the crazy one. Together, we'd give her a strict lecture.

"I'm going to get a drink..." I said.

"Mmhmm."

"Okay."

I got up from the couch, lightly holding my hand to my head. The difference in our common sense made my head spin. How could anyone be that unguarded? Also, how unobservant could Mizuto be?!

Their behavior exceeded that of couples. It was like they were living together. They were acting like a couple that had been living together for three or so years. *If* Mizuto had suddenly stuck his hand down her shirt, she probably would've just said a one-off comment about how it tickled or something. It was *that* kind of atmosphere.

It wouldn't be weird if the question of marriage came up and they nonchalantly agreed to it. The term "close proximity" didn't even begin to describe it. How could this happen? How could the two of them have this atmosphere when they didn't even live together?! *We're not like that and we actually live together!*

None of this made sense. But the weirdest part about it was the fact that despite him rejecting her, they were still *this* close. Their relationship should've been strained, not ingrained! It made me feel like a fool that Akatsuki-san and I spent any time genuinely worrying about whether they could go back to being friends.

At this point, it seemed crazy that the two of them could ever *not* be friends. They were a miracle. How many people in the world were *this* in sync with each other? I'd made way more friends than he had in high school, but watching the two of them made me feel like I was losing.

I was jealous of them. I really was. But I wasn't about to do something to mess up their relationship.

I returned to the couch with a pitcher of barley tea and a cup, which I promptly filled up. Just as I started to drink, Mizuto interrupted me.

"Give me some too."

"Huh?"

"I'm thirsty," he continued, his eyes still firmly glued to the screen.

"I would've brought you some if you'd asked."

"I forgot."

Wow, he's so into this movie. I kinda knew what he was into from when we were dating. Whether it was classic literature, a light novel, a mystery novel, or a movie, he liked works in which the creator's personality was on full display.

Hm, I see. He wasn't really in the habit of watching anime movies, but Makoto Shinkai was apparently right up his alley. Higashira-san turned her head on Mizuto's lap to look up at him. Her lips were curled into a smile. Apparently, this had gone exactly as she'd planned.

His words from when he rejected Higashira-san played back in my

head. *"My small heart only has room for one more in it. I'm a petty guy. I only have the capacity to truly face one person right now, and that seat is already filled, though she has no right to it."*

I was the only person who knew exactly who filled that seat. But...

"Fine, here. I already drank from it, though."

"Thanks," he said, blindly taking the cup before gulping the tea down.

He may have been a string bean, but right now, he looked like a proper guy. After finishing, he handed the cup back to me, and I poured more inside before putting it to my lips.

"Huh?"

The cold tea flowed into me, washing away all the agonizing feelings.

"Um..." Higashira-san gave Mizuto and me a confused look.

"Mmm?"

"Hm?" *Does she want tea too?*

But I was sucker punched by her next statement. "You two just shared an indirect kiss..."

"Huh...?"

"Uh...?"

Mizuto and I looked at each other and then down to the cup. Our lips hadn't touched, but they'd both touched the cup. An indirect kiss.

"Oh..." It looked like the dots connected in Mizuto's head, but he turned back to the screen.

Seeing his nonchalant reaction made Higashira-san look at him with an expression that almost said "That's it?"

An indirect kiss... That rang a bell. I forgot that was a thing. I resumed drinking my tea.

"Wait... Seriously? That doesn't bother you? Is this what it means to be a family? Or, perhaps, is this just how high schoolers are?"

It wasn't like we'd used each other's toothbrushes or chopsticks. This was nothing. We'd lost that kind of pure innocence long ago. In this regard, he'd yet to share an understanding with her. As soon as I thought that, I felt some of those agonizing feelings disappear.

The credits rolled and Mizuto slumped against the couch. Ultimately, Higashira-san had spent the entire two-hour duration on his lap.

"How was it?" she asked, looking up at him.

"It was good."

"What did you enjoy specifically?"

"At first, I was really taken in by the beautiful scenery, but I started to get really invested in the gimmick and how that all worked. The smaller details kinda made it seem like the director was putting

his fetishes front and center. Overall, it felt like it had the functional beauty of a Hollywood movie. All these pieces gave it an ineffable charm.”

He said that all in one breath?!

“Right, the fetishistic aspect! I completely understand!” Higashira-san jumped up, her eyes sparkling. “Wasn’t it great how he couldn’t stop rubbing his boobs?”

“Oh yeah, that’s a really common trope with body swapping, right? I never expected such a niche genre to be popular in Japan.”

“Every Makoto Shinkai film after *Your Name* has demonstrated his skill at creating a movie that appears mainstream on the surface but is filled with his fetishes that he forces upon the viewer. It’s similar to... Oh, yes! It’s similar to forcing an innocent girl to watch an uncensored porno.”

“Yellow card.”

“What?! W-Wait, I wasn’t attempting to make a dirty joke. Have you not read *Yu Yu Hakusho*?! Does your father possess a copy by chance?!”

As knowledgeable as I was about the mystery novel genre, the conversation that the two of them were having was filled with references to different subcultures from all over the place. *If I was an otaku like Higashira-san, would we have been able to stay this friendly?*

I immediately brushed off that pointless hypothetical. Being on good terms with him wouldn’t fix who he was at his core, nor would it make me any less disillusioned. I didn’t want to be like Higashira-san. If I was, I probably wouldn’t have become friends with Akatsuki-san and the others.

“Phew... Focusing on a movie for two hours is exhausting,” Mizuto said, staring at the ceiling.

“You just don’t have any stamina,” I quipped. He did nothing but read books all day. How was *this* more draining?

“Oh, then in that case...” Higashira-san suddenly sat up straight and patted her thighs. “It’s *your* turn now. Rest your head on *my* lap.”

“Okay, then...”

“Wait, no, no. Stop!” I frantically grabbed Mizuto’s shoulder as he was about to lie down. “You can’t! That’s like... You just can’t!”

“Why not?” he asked.

“For what reason?” Higashira-san tilted her head curiously.

The reason lies with that chest of yours! If he lay down on her lap, he’d be at a perfect angle to...

“I’m offering the lap of a high school girl. It’s very comfortable. Act now, and I will even add an ear cleaning. I don’t do this for just any boy,” Higashira-san said through a suspicious smile. Mizuto’s eyelids drooped a bit.

“Why do you have to make it sound so weird?! Where did you even learn that from?” I exclaimed.

“Higashira’s ear cleaning sounds like a nightmare...” he said.

“Huh?”

“Wha—”

Mizuto leaned not towards Higashira-san but towards me...and then onto *my* lap. He shifted around a little, trying to find a comfortable spot, before dozing off.

Higashira-san and I both fell silent. Neither of us could believe what had just happened. Ever since summer vacation began, he’d been sleeping until the afternoon. Thanks to that, he often got sleepy around nighttime. *Even so, how could he fall asleep so comfortably on someone else’s lap...?*

“May I interpret this as Mizuto being so uninterested in me cleaning his ears that he went to you instead?”

“I think that’s what happened...”

“How rude. Do I really look like I’m lacking in dexterity?”

“Honestly? Yes.”

“S-Seriously?!”

For the life of me, I couldn’t imagine Higashira-san knitting.

“But...” Higashira-san said in a low voice while moving in front of me. She crouched down and looked at his sleeping face.



“I got to see how cute he looks while he sleeps, so I’ll forgive him. Heh heh heh.” A bright smile spread across her face as she poked his cheek.

Seeing this, there was only one thing I could think. *She really does love him.* Even though she had been rejected—even though she knew that she couldn’t be his girlfriend—she couldn’t help how much she loved him. If Mizuto treated her like one would treat their dog, she treated Mizuto like one would treat their cat. Higashira-san was usually so expressionless, but she was nothing but smiles as she watched him sleep.

“This is a good opportunity. Perhaps I should clean his ears regardless.”

“What? Are you serious? Isn’t it scary to stick things in ears?”

“Oh, I understand that sentiment. When my mother first cleaned my ears, I was frightened. I truly wished for her not to begin a treasure hunt in my ear.”

“Uh-huh...”

“Perhaps a peck instead.”

“Yeah, that’d be— Huh?!”

The conversation had flowed so smoothly that I’d ended up nodding, but... *What did she just say?!* Higashira-san was staring intently at Mizuto’s face.

“Higashira-san... Um, did you just say ‘peck?’”

“Yes. He would be none the wiser.”

“True, but... Huh? That’s what you want your first kiss to be like?”

“Hm... Certainly, a better location and atmosphere would be preferable. And I won’t be able to insert my tongue if he’s not conscious.”

“What kind of first kiss are you trying to do?!”

“In addition, he won’t be able to get caught up in the moment and disrobe me either.”

How much of a horndog are you?!

“I can’t believe you’re able to endure just being close friends with the way you think.”

“I am putting in a decent amount of effort. Honestly, I get inexplicably aroused whenever he pats me on the head. I completely understand heroines whose cheeks flush when they receive a head pat.”

“You *do* know that they aren’t aroused or anything right? That’s not why their cheeks are red!” *She’s been damaged by shojo manga.*

“Truthfully, when I confessed to Mizuto-kun, I was partially thinking about his body.”

“Really?!”

“Of course! Being on good terms with someone *and* being able to engage in sexual relations with them is sublime, wouldn't you agree?”

“Um... Hm...” She wasn't wrong.

“Here's an example: while I enjoy all-ages visual novels, if there is an adult version, I'd prefer to play that. Does that make sense?”

“No. Not at all.”

“Simply being friends with him limits what we could possibly do together,” Higashira-san continued, putting her face close to his. “I would've liked to see a horny Mizuto-kun.” Her face was expressionless, making it hard to read, but for some reason, it made my chest feel tight.

Maybe it's because I was seeing what my past self could've been. I knew that my past self and Higashira-san were completely different, but they kept overlapping in my mind. If he had rejected me two years ago at the end of summer vacation, would we have been able to continue being friends? Would we have been able to stay close friends like he and Higashira-san?

“All I'm saying is that there's a certain type of friend that would allow for friendship and the benefits of a carnal relationship.”

“You know that I won't support you if you try to go that route.”

“Of course! I wasn't referring to friends with benefits. You misinterpreted my words.”

“You phrased it like that on purpose!”

I misinterpreted... I misinterpreted her, huh? Misinterpretation is the main reason so many confessions and the resulting relationships don't work out—the root of all evil, so to speak.

“Hm...” Higashira-san continued to stare at Mizuto's face while restlessly shaking her hips in a tantalizing way. Suddenly, she shot to her feet.

“May I...borrow your restroom?”

“Huh?” *Is she...trying to do what I think she's trying to do? In someone else's house?!*

“Hm?” Higashira-san tilted her head in confusion at my reaction. But it seemed like she'd realized what I was thinking because her face turned a crimson color. “I-It's not what you think! I simply need to urinate!”

“O-Oh... Okay...” She'd been talking about all these dirty things, so my mind had jumped straight into the gutter.

“I must say, I'm surprised.” A teasing smile crept across her face. “Mizuto-kun claims that you don't possess this sort of knowledge, but...it seems you do.”

“W-Well, I *am* a high schooler. I've taken health classes.”

“Heh heh heh. I enjoy those kinds of stories which feature the beautiful, top-of-her-class honor student. It very much gets the *juices*

flowing.”

“You’re sooo gross!” I didn’t bother coming up with a clever retort or anything. I just insulted her, prompting her to scurry away.

I do possess this sort of knowledge. I’m just not comfortable with it. I’d also been putting on an act while around him...because I was scared of any misinterpretations.

With Higashira-san gone, the room fell silent except for the clock, which ticked away as Mizuto slept, softly breathing. I looked down at my thighs, which currently had a slight weight on them. His long eyelashes rested on one another and his bangs slightly covered his eyes. As I used my finger to move them out of the way, their soft, smooth sensation remained.

Soft bursts of air escaped his thin lips. I knew what they felt like. They were gentle but sometimes dry. Sometimes I’d lent him my lip balm before going back in for more...and sometimes (as a joke, of course), I’d put it on him with my own lips.

It had been awkward at first. It took everything I had, but our lips only lightly touched one another’s. We had to tilt our heads to avoid our noses touching, and it nearly became a game in which we had to guess where the other was going. Then we laughed and the romantic atmosphere dissipated.

After a while, it became an unwritten rule that I’d tilt my head right. I’d get embarrassed by how rough my breathing got, though, so we couldn’t kiss for too long.

We’d kiss for three seconds at a time, separate, and catch our breaths. While we did, we’d gaze into each other’s eyes, and then kiss again. Then it’d end when we both tapped each other on the back. These were the rules that we’d made up. Rules that only we knew—rules that he probably still remembered. Even if he and Higashira-san started dating, she’d never know about them.

I leaned forward, and my hair fell to my right. I moved it behind my ear as I did when I read. I’d been able to play it off before, but it was hard to do when he was sleeping. Part of me wanted those feelings to return. The ones that made me feel so light, like I was floating. The ones that made me feel as if my head was going to boil over. The ones that made me crave more and more and fall deeper in love.

When was the last time I’d felt like that? It’d been a little before our relationship got messed up. Probably last June or so. The feelings that’d been sleeping inside me for a year and two months were starting to well up and were about to overflow.

Suddenly, Higashira-san’s words played in my head. *“I would’ve liked to see a horny Mizuto-kun.”* I would too. I’d wanted to see him like that so, so, so many times. But he hadn’t even given me that special

look in so long—the face he'd make when I was the only person reflected in his eyes. Nor had I felt his thin arms that he'd tightly wrap around me, like he was saying that no one else could have me. And the sensation of our bodies seemingly melting together.

As soon as I remembered that, I was overwhelmed by a need to see all of that again. I knew I shouldn't, but I couldn't stop myself. *This... This is simply lust.* Then I felt that desire being chilled further and further by something. It was the memory of him rejecting the kiss.

I had remembered our time together, was filled with my old emotions, and tried to do one of the same old things we used to. There were a lot of times in the four months that we lived together I'd wanted to do that. But...that was just because of our lingering feelings. There was a hole in my heart, and he had the key to fill it—and I *yearned* for its return.

It was shameful. Pitiful. Pathetic, even. I couldn't accept that Higashira-san's once-in-a-lifetime confession had ended in failure because of my desires. It was a misinterpretation. We were *misinterpreting* things.

I took a deep breath and slowly moved his head off my thighs before standing up. I couldn't let myself get worked up by these feelings, especially when I'd given Higashira-san grief for essentially the same thing. I needed to cool off. I slowly walked out of the living room to the other bathroom.

I looked at myself in the mirror, and a girl with a completely flat, expressionless face looked back at me.

“So, how'd it go? What's going on between Mizuto-kun and Higashira-san?”

It was now night, and mom was excitedly asking me for the results of my reconnaissance.

“They're very good friends,” I answered honestly.

“Definitely! What else?”

“That's it.”

“What?!” Mom looked very discontent with my answer, but I wasn't lying. “Don't you have any specifics? Like...what did they do?”

“Uh... Mizuto-kun let Higashira-san rest on his lap...”

“Oh!”

“Higashira-san said she felt hot and suddenly took off a layer...”

“Wow!”

“She suddenly felt itchy and scratched the inside of her bra...”

“Uh...?” Mom's face had changed from very interested to very confused. It was only natural.

“Also, remember that this all happened right in front of me as if it was normal.”

“Uh... Huh?!” Mom tilted her head, incredibly confused. “They sound like a couple who’ve been living together for three years.” *Wow, there’s that mother-daughter connection.* “But they suit each other, don’t you think? Mizuto-kun has an aura of mystery just like hers, so a girl who marches to the beat of her own drum is perfect!”

“If you say so.”

If Higashira-san’d asked me for help before she confessed, I would’ve wholeheartedly supported her. I truly believed that there wasn’t a boy and girl in this world who got along better than they did. Even so, that didn’t mean that they would end up dating. *Humans really are complicated.*

“In that case, you can’t get careless, Yume.”

“Huh?” My heart stopped at her words. *W-Wait, why me? Does she know about—*

“Mizuto-kun’s gonna leave you in the dust. You need to find yourself a nice guy too! You’re so cute, I bet you’ll find one in no time!”

“O-Oh... Yeah...” *So that’s what she meant. But me? With a guy other than Mizuto?* “This isn’t a race. I’ll take my time.”

“Aww...”

It’s unfortunate. It’s very, very unfortunate, but her impression of us is the biggest misinterpretation of them all.

The Ex-Couple Visits Family (1)

The Siberian Dancing Girl

My first thought when we got off the train was about how *not* in the middle of nowhere we were. We'd gotten off at a large station that had a ton of gift shops. If none of those caught your eye, well, there was a kind of mall right outside the station. It honestly felt like a city with the number of people out and about. "Middle of nowhere," huh? I hadn't expected Mizuto's description to be so hyperbolic.

And then we boarded a bus. The sound of air being released as the doors closed filled the cabin. Surprisingly, there was only one other passenger aside from us. *It's the middle of the day... How is this possible?*

While doubt swirled in my mind, the outside scenery rapidly began to change. Civilization was quickly getting more and more primitive with each passing second. Buildings disappeared, and fields took their place. The tallest things around were the metal transmission towers.

The deeper we went into the valley, the greener it got. The only reminder of human existence was the bus we were riding. Outside was just field after dull field.

"Thank you!" Mineaki-ojisan said. The bus driver tipped his hat in acknowledgment. They apparently knew each other.

With the bus gone, we were left at a roofless bus stop surrounded by seemingly endless fields. The only shade was provided by the treetops above us. The branches shook each time the wind blew, making me wince when the bright sun flashed through the gaps.

The cries of cicadas filled my ears now that the whirring of the bus engine was long gone. Where was the world I knew? Could I go back home? I was starting to get a little anxious in this seemingly new dimension.

"Wow! Look, Yume! There are only three buses per day!" mom said with an energy unbefitting her age as she pointed at the bus schedule.

"One in the morning, afternoon, and night," Mineaki-ojisan added. "We're better off than most folks. It's hard to send a bus all the way out to the countryside. Barely anyone gets off here, so there's not much money to be made."

"What do you do when you need to shop?"

"There are a lot of old folks out here, so the town's stores deliver

batch orders according to the local government's instructions. Plus, most of the old folks can order stuff online without any problem. If they need something more, they can drive to town themselves."

"I see..."

"It's a little rough for the younger people without their licenses. They have to make sure they don't miss the bus—otherwise they're stranded. Although, I guess it's a good opportunity for them to live life a little. Anyway, shall we?" he said, shepherding us forward.

So Mizuto's grandmother's house was walking distance from the bus stop. I reached for my suitcase, but another hand beat me to it.

"H-Hey!"

He pretended not to hear me and casually pulled my suitcase along. *What's his problem? That's my suitcase. At least ask first!* I hurried to catch up to him so I could give him a piece of my mind, but something stopped me. What, you might ask? A very, *very* steep hill.

Mizuto walked right on up without saying a word, still dragging my suitcase behind him. It couldn't have been easy to do that, but he wasn't struggling, as far as I could tell. His expression was just as nonchalant as it always was. *But seriously...if you're gonna do something like this, tell me why before you do it!*

"Oh..."

"W-Wow..."

After climbing the hill, we arrived at a wooden gate. *This is his grandmother's house? It's more of a mansion than a house.* Both mom and I were speechless. The front of the house had a white wall that stretched for about fifty feet or more, and it was adorned with a beautiful tiled roof.

"Is your family actually loaded, Mineaki-san?"

"The only rich one in the family was my grandfather, but he didn't leave an inheritance. I heard he donated most of his wealth. This is about the only thing left from him."

"Aw, what a waste."

"Both my mom and uncle left the house as soon as they could, so they couldn't complain."

Oh, right. Now that I think about it, Mizuto's a scholarship student. I glanced at my little stepbrother standing next to me. He was wearing an annoyed expression while glaring towards the sun.

"So hot..." I said.

"True. Let's go in."

We passed through the front garden to get to the doorbell. Despite how grand the house was, the noise from the doorbell was as normal as any house's.

"Coming..."

The sliding door opened and an apron-clad old lady appeared on the other side. My first thought was that she might've been a helper or something, but her face lit up as soon as she saw Mizuto.

"Oh! Mizuto? You've gotten so big!"

Mizuto gave her a quick nod in greeting, and she burst into laughter.

"You're just as unsociable as ever! No wonder you haven't gotten yourself a girlfriend yet!"

"Mom, didn't you say you want to avoid becoming the kind of old country lady who tells people what's what about relationships?" Mineaki-ojisan chided.

"Oh, whoops! You're right. Well, come on in!" she said, beckoning us inside. "I apologize for my late introduction. I'm Natsume Irido." She bowed to me and mom. "I would've done it sooner if this stupid son of mine hadn't told me out of the blue that he'd remarried..."

"It wasn't out of the blue. I told you two weeks ago—"

"That's the definition of out of the blue!"

I covertly nodded in agreement, and I could tell that Mizuto had done the same. They'd kept it a secret from us for as long as they could in order to help us focus on exams, but there *had* to have been a better way to go about it. Although, knowing that our parents were going to marry each other right before we broke up might have been the worst possible scenario.

"I'm so sorry mom!" mom chimed in. "We weren't sure about everything until the very last minute."

"It's fine, Yuni-san. I'm happy that you chose to marry him. Thank you very much."

"Oh, no, you don't need to thank me or anything!"

Natsume-san—Grandma?—deeply bowed her head to mom, making her flustered. *Now that I think about it, I have no clue how mom and Mineaki-ojisan got together in the first place. I bet it was rough...*

"And you must be Yume-chan," she said, looking over at me. I felt my body tense up and my back straighten.

"I'm Yume Irido. Thank you for having me."

"You're so well-mannered. How nice. Are you getting along with Mizuto?"

"Y-Yes."

"They get along better than we do, don't they, Yuni-san?" Mineaki-ojisan grinned.

"They seriously do!" mom replied with a smile. "Mizuto-kun's so nice to her."

"Mizuto is? Really?" Natsume-san gently laughed. "It's strange, getting a mature grandchild like her out of nowhere. It feels more like I've gotten a granddaughter-in-law."

“Huh?” A *what?* I felt myself freeze up while mom giggled.

“Aw, Yume, do you want to marry Mizuto-kun?” Natsume-san asked teasingly.

“O-Of course not! Never!”

“Hee hee, I’m just kidding!”

My heart can’t take this. I peeked at Mizuto to see his reaction, but as expected, he was stone-cold. This was better than him getting flustered too, but it still pissed me off for some reason.

“You must all be tired. Come on. Mineaki, did you eat lunch?”

“Yeah, we picked something up on the way.”

“Is that right? Okay, then put your stuff down first. Mineaki, show them around.”

“Okay. This way.”

We took our luggage and followed Mineaki-ojisan deeper into the house, which was even bigger than it looked. I could see myself getting lost in here if I was alone. It was also old; each step we took made the aged wood creak.

“Is your mom from Kansai?”

“No, but she definitely acts like it because of dad. He was a Kyoto man through and through.”

As mom and Mineaki-ojisan chatted away, I looked out the window, only to see a beautiful garden. Our house had a garden too, but the one here was so grand, it felt straight out of a TV show. I’d never seen anything like it in real life. It reminded me of a classic movie called *The Inugamis*.

Mineaki-ojisan pointed to a door in the hall. “That’s our room over there. Your room’s next to ours.”

“Okay.”

“After you put your stuff down, we’ll go visit the altar.”

“Got it!”

Maybe they were being considerate of Mizuto and me when they planned the room assignments, because mom and I were in one room, and Mizuto and Mineaki-ojisan were in the other. Speaking of which, ours was a traditional Japanese-style room.

As I took my clothes out of my suitcase, I heard mom let out a relieved sigh.

“I’m so glad she’s such a nice person. I have no idea what I would’ve done if she was the stereotypical strict mother-in-law.”

“You’ve never talked to her before?”

“Just a little over the phone, but that’s about it.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah. What a relief,” mom said, slumping onto the ground.

I hadn’t realized she’d been so nervous, but it made sense. Who wouldn’t be nervous facing their partner’s family and wondering if

they'd be accepted or not? Mom and I were outsiders. I'd come with a happy-go-lucky attitude, but...were we going to be okay?

"Their entire family's going to be here, right? How many do you think that will be?"

"Hm... I think most of the Tanesato family will be here."

"The...Tanesato family?"

"That's her maiden name. She has an older brother who has a son and grandchildren. There should be a good number of people from their side of the family here."

My grandmother's brother, huh...? What was I supposed to call him? He also had a son and grandchildren. I wondered if they were around my age, and if we would get along.

"Yuni-san, Yume-chan, you two ready?"

"Yeah! Come on, Yume, let's go!"

As we left our room, I caught sight of Mizuto's face. I still had no idea what was going on with him. Right now, it looked like he was spacing out and idly following Mineaki-ojisan around. *Has he even said one word since he got here?*

We walked through the creaking halls again and finally arrived at the room with the Buddhist altar. Since we were here for Obon, we'd most likely visit the actual graves as well. We couldn't visit Mizuto's mom's grave until we got back home, because her grave wasn't here.

"Here we go." Mineaki-ojisan stopped in front of the room. Right as he was about to open the sliding doors, they opened on their own.

"Ah." This sound came from a young woman standing on the other side of the door. She had red-framed glasses and was about ten centimeters taller than me. I guessed that she was a college student. Overall, I felt a kind of instant kinship with her because it felt like she looked bookish, kinda like me. But the moment that thought entered my mind, my illusions were shattered.

"Mizuto!!! It's been sooo long!" she squealed as she tightly hugged Mizuto.

Uh... What? My brain couldn't keep up with what was happening. She looked like a calm, collected librarian, but that impression of her immediately disappeared. She sounded like a girl at a club. Also, is it just me, or is she three times as outgoing and social as Akatsuki-san? Worse, though, was the fact that she was so physically intimate. I'd never seen a person who hugged someone as a greeting. Is she American? Is she?!

"Oh, Madoka-chan! How have you been?"

"Good. It's nice to see you again, Mineaki-ojisan!" the woman named Madoka replied, still squeezing Mizuto against her chest.

How long are you going to hug him for?! She was most likely his relative, but he *hated* being approached by other people. A hug was

completely inconceivable. If I tried hugging him, he would brush me off without saying anything and ignore me, and he'd—

“Hello, Madoka-san.”

He's talking now?! His facial expression hadn't changed a bit, but I was positive I heard him speak. I was in shock. Up until now I'd only heard him breathe, but now he was *talking*?!

“Heh heh! Phew. You're still as unsociable as ever! I was worried that you would've had a high school glow-up or something.”

“High school's not a place for that.”

“Whew, aren't you cool?”

Now he's bantering?! Also, did he just diss me?!

“Hm?” Madoka... No, Madoka-san let go of Mizuto and looked at me and mom. “Are these two...”

“Oh, yes,” Mineaki-ojisan replied. “Let me introduce you. This is my wife and her daughter.”

“I'm Yuni Irido.”

“I-I'm Yume.”

“Oho... Hm...”

I could feel her staring at us...no, primarily me. *Why?*

Mineaki-ojisan gestured towards Madoka-san. “And this is my uncle's granddaughter, Madoka Tanesato, and his grandson, Chikuma-kun.”

Who? I was confused by the second name, but then I saw a small head nervously peeking out from behind Madoka-san. At first, I thought Chikuma was a girl, but then I remembered that Mineaki-ojisan had called him the grandson.

Very shy and very cute, he was probably in fifth or sixth grade. I could tell how nervous he was. His eyes were darting back and forth behind his long bangs. As soon as our eyes met, he hid behind his older sister, Madoka-san.

There was no doubt that he was shy. There was no way my expectations could be betrayed this time. The connection I felt was genuine. I used to be just like him, hiding behind my mom.

“Sorry about him. He's so shy.”

“Oh, it's okay, Yume used to be like him until recently. Right?”

“Could you not volunteer that information without asking?” I grumbled.

“Ha ha, sorry.”

How could parents be so loose-lipped about their children? I walked around Madoka-san and crouched in front of Chikuma-kun to be eye level with him.

“Hello, I'm Yume Irido. It's very nice to meet you.” I tried sounding as nice as possible, but his face got even redder and he ran off into the hallway. *Huh?*

“Hm... I see.” Madoka-san was looking at me again as if she was appraising me.

“*What* do you see?”

“Oh no, it’s just that I can tell how hard you’ve worked.”

“Huh?”

“Don’t get me wrong—I’m not making fun of you or anything! I was worried what might happen if Mizuto-kun’s new stepsister was the super outgoing type, but seeing you, I’m relieved. I’m really happy you’re his sibling! I look forward to getting to know you more as a cousin.”

Madoka-san suddenly grabbed my hand and began shaking it. *Uh... Huh?* Did she just compliment me? Also, why did she say “as a cousin”? She wasn’t putting on a show now so she could pull the rug out from under me later, right?

“Now that I look at it, we have the same taste in clothes. We’re so similar!”

“Huh?”

I took another look at Madoka-san’s outfit, which was just like mine: bright colors, a pleated long skirt, and a tucked-in, slightly too big blouse. It was the same kind of outfit that Akatsuki-san and I had put together for Higashira-san.

Also, it hit me that Madoka-san had a great body. She was taller than Higashira-san, so she appeared to be slenderer, but her breasts seemed to be about the same size. And since I was so close to her, I was getting a good look at her cleavage. My heart skipped a beat.

“Yes... Now that you mention it, I think we may have similar styles.”

“Right?! I’ve always liked these kinds of clothes. My friends at college say my style’s childish, but I really feel like loose and comfortable clothes are perfect for girls. You think so too, right?”

“Y-Yes... I think they’re very cute.”

I’d only adopted this style to match *his* tastes—wait. I tilted my head. If she’s “always liked these kinds of clothes” then wouldn’t that mean that she’d always been wearing such modest outfits? Mizuto would have had to see her in these clothes too. So if he wanted me to wear the same kinds of clothes, wouldn’t that mean... *Hm?!*

I’d always thought that he preferred this style because of light novels or something, but could it be that the real reason was...

“I’m so happy! I think we’re gonna get along great! There aren’t a lot of young people among our relatives, so I hope we can be good friends, Yume-chan!”

“O-Oh, yes... Of course...”

Suddenly I remembered something that I’d heard: a guy’s first love is usually an older relative.

As night arrived, so did more and more of their relatives. Suddenly, it was like we were at a banquet where we, the new faces, were the guests of honor.

“Are you and Mizuto gettin’ along all right? He’s such an obstinate kid.”

“They’ve hit it off surprisingly well, actually.”

“Really? That’s a load off our minds.”

This had already happened five times. At this point, I was just smiling and sipping my oolong tea.

“Hey, Madoka-chan, you’re really puttin’ ’em back!”

“You *just* turned twenty! This must be the Tanesato blood in ya.”

“You haven’t seen anything yet!”

There were a little over a dozen of us, the majority drinking away while Chikuma-kun, Mizuto, and I awkwardly sat around. I felt *really* out of place. I couldn’t keep up with their energy at all. Was this how drinking parties were? Or was this just what a family reunion was like? Either way, I had no experience, so I didn’t know.

“I was so worried about a boy and girl living under the same roof.”

“Kids these days. They’re all so-called ‘herbivores.’”

“Mine-kun, nobody says that anymore.”

“Oh, really?”

“Hey, Yume-chan, keep eatin’. Here, have more sushi.”

“O-Okay...”

All I could do during this all-over-the-place banquet was watch as the pile of food on my plate grew.

“It’s not fair!” I heard a voice call out, and then suddenly, something soft touched my back.

“Wha— M-Madoka-san?”

“It’s so not fair, Yume-chan!”

She reeks of alcohol! Madoka-san, who was currently pressing against my back, was completely drunk. *Also, how freaking big are those things?!* I could tell their exact shape, even though she was wearing a bra. I could feel their shape changing as she leaned against me. She was just another girl, but it still made my heart beat faster.

“Y’know, Mizuto-kun neever talked to meee. So how did you two get sooo close sooo faaast?”

“Huh? You weren’t close at first?”



“Yeaah. I’ve been looking after him eever since he was in kindergarten.”

Mizuto was completely ignoring us and focusing on his boiled potatoes. I was surprised, though. He was pretty nice to me right off the bat, but he used to avoid her?

“Mizuto-kun is just like grandpa.” The one who said this was Chikuma-kun and Madoka-san’s father. He looked like he was around forty, like Mineaki-ojisan. *Is he my uncle too? How should I address him?*

“He’s just as taciturn, stubborn, and avid a reader as he,” he continued. “I’m excited to see him become a big shot in the future.”

“Hey! Why aren’t you excited about your *own* daughter?” Madoka-san huffed.

“Maybe after you stop being late for every class, ya dumb bastard.”

“Ha! Girls can’t be bastards. *Now* who’s dumb?”

I tilted my head. “When you say ‘grandpa,’ are you referring to...”

“To you, he’d be a great-grandfather. He was the previous owner of this mansion. Uh...what was his name again?”

“Kosuke. Kosuke Tanesato,” said the still-sober Mineaki-ojisan.

“He had a pretty dramatic life. As a parent, I want my son to be able to live a peaceful life.”

“And you’re doin’ it! Your son’s grown up to be so healthy. You’ve done a good job, Mineaki-kun! You really have!”

“I really appreciate that,” Mineaki-ojisan faintly smiled and took a drink from Madoka-san’s dad. Mom gently smiled from next to him.

“He raised him as a single dad from pretty much the moment Mizuto-kun was born...” Madoka-san said, still pressed against my back. “I heard that my grandmother helped out, but it was still tough.”

Mizuto’s birth mother, Kana Irido, had a weak body and died right after giving birth to him. Mineaki-ojisan had probably still been in his twenties. Despite losing his wife at such a young age, he’d continued to raise and protect Mizuto. Then he’d married mom right after Mizuto finished middle school.

It made sense. The timing of their marriage, the fact that they’d held off on telling us until the very last second, the fact that we were more warmly welcomed than I’d expected—it was all proof that Mineaki-ojisan had overcome the biggest challenge that life had thrown at him. This made me think even more than before that I—we—needed to protect our family.

“Dad...”

“Hm?”

Before I realized it, Mizuto was standing behind Mineaki-ojisan.

“I’m done eating.”

“Oh, okay. Thanks.”

“I’ll see you later.” Mizuto walked out of the room. *Where’s he going, and why did Mineaki-ojisan thank him?*

“I’m not letting you run away, Yume-chan!”

“M-Madoka-san, you’re crushing me!”

“You got a boyfriend? I bet you do! You’re super cute! If you don’t, I’ll datecha!”

“Madoka drank a lot!”

“It runs in the family! Ha ha ha!”

“Phew...” I was finally able to relax as I soaked in hot water up to my shoulders. I found myself idly watching the steam rise up to the blue tiled ceiling.

I had relatives on my mom’s side that I saw every now and then, but this was definitely the first time I’d met so many at once. It gave me mixed feelings, experiencing it with *him*. I never even imagined meeting all of his family when we were dating.

I hadn’t heard a thing about his great-grandfather having been rich or that he had a beautiful cousin like Madoka-san either. Mizuto had been acting no differently than usual, but it was unusual that he left the dinner by himself. *Who does that?*

I got out of the bath and walked to the veranda. This was a part of traditional Japanese homes that I had to take advantage of now that I was here. Being able to sit out here on this deck-like platform while enjoying the night breeze had an air of elegance to it.

I could still hear the adults partying in the distance. Among them, I could hear my mom, who’d apparently stayed to drink as well. I was amazed at how easily she was able to adapt. *Are we really related?*

“Oh?”

“Ah...”

Apparently, I wasn’t the only one who’d come here. Chikuma-kun was sitting there, holding a portable game console in his hands. It made sense for a kid his age, but thanks to a certain someone, I was a little surprised that he wasn’t reading a book.

“You’re out here by yourself, Chikuma-kun?”

“Y-Yeah...”

Oh, wow, he responded to me...even though he didn’t take his eyes off the game. It kind of made me happy.

“Where’s your sister?”

“She’s still drinking...”

“Oh... I see...” *She just turned twenty, right? How is she keeping up with them already?*

“Wh-When she gets drunk, she gets really touchy-feely.”

Oh, wow! Now he's talking to me!

"So you ran away?" I asked.

"Y-Yeah..."

"Did you take a bath?"

"I-I did..."

"I see. Maybe I should let *him* know, then..." Natsume-san had told me that after I finished my bath, I should tell the others so they could go in. I was sure that *he* hadn't taken one yet.

As I thought about that, I felt Chikuma-kun staring at me.

"Something wrong?"

"U-Uh, no. Nothing..." he said, inching away from me.

Is he nervous about me? I couldn't blame him. Some random girl who'd become his cousin-in-law was talking to him all of a sudden. I'd have my guard up too. Maybe if we had a mutual topic we could talk about, I could get him to open up. Reading didn't seem to be something I could use, though...

"Hey, Chikuma-kun... What do you think about that guy—I mean, Mizuto-kun?" Ultimately, the only shared topic I could come up with was *him*. I really had no other choice.

Chikuma-kun averted his gaze. "U-Uh..."

"Is he nice? Scary?"

"Um... He's..." After taking a while to look for the right words, he finally came up with something. "I don't really know."

"Really?"

"We haven't really talked... He's always in great-grandpa's study."

His great-grandfather's study? Really? He always loved to hole up somewhere, even at his relative's house.

"B-But—" For some reason, Chikuma-kun seemed frantic or worried about something.

"Yes?"

"I think he's kinda cool..."

"Cool...?"

Chikuma-kun nodded embarrassedly. "He's very bold...and he doesn't care about what other people think. I... I can't be like that."

"I see..."

I totally get that. I'd respected him for the same exact reason back then. He may have seemed infallible, but really, he wasn't. He'd messed up a lot of different times.

"But of course he does..." I murmured.

"Huh?"

"Oh, sorry, I was talking to myself." I laughed, trying to play it off. "Sorry that I interrupted your game."

"Oh, it's okay..."

"I'll see you later... Oh, actually, can I ask one more thing?" I

turned around like a detective who looked like she was about to let the suspect get away, but instead asked the question that would nail them. “Where’s the study?”

I remembered the first time I saw him. On that first day of classes when everyone else was busy making friends, he was the only person who was calmly deep in the world of books. This was back when I was Ayai, and he was still Irido.

Due to our seating numbers, I was next to the window in the front of the class. He sat right behind me and would read in complete silence. I never saw him as pitiful. Every time I turned around, I felt a little more courageous. It reminded me that it was okay to live like he did.

I didn’t care about getting teased. I could blend into the background and dive into my own little world. Or maybe I was relieved by the fact that I’d found someone worse than me. Maybe that’s just how weak of a mentality I had. Either way, his presence supported me in middle school. That was a fact. I never expected him to become so important to me.

I followed Chikuma-kun’s instructions to the study, which was at the end of the hallway. This room had belonged to Mizuto’s...or I guess, *our* great-grandfather, Kosuke Tanesato. It was the room that Mizuto would hole up in every time he visited. He himself had mentioned that whenever he came here, he passed the time by reading books.

The door was open, letting in moonlight which softly illuminated the cellar-like room. There were two huge bookcases on either side of the room. There were so many of them that they were scattered across the floor because they couldn’t fit on the shelves. The already small room was even more cramped because of that.

The main sources of light were a single old light bulb in the center of the ceiling, a small desk lamp, and the moonlight. In this poorly lit cavern of a room, he was sitting in front of the small desk, blending in.

It was like this room was stuck a few decades in the past. Mizuto looked like he was right at home. A hallucination encapsulated me—visions of him sitting here in the post-war period filled my mind. I hesitated to call out to him or even set foot inside. This space was complete.

The world was already complete with him. It would be destroyed if an extra like me entered. This was who Mizuto Irido had always been. He completed his world. There was no space for anyone else to enter. But if that was the case... If that’s how he’d always been, then

why... *Why did you take someone like me as your girlfriend?*

My memories from middle school felt distant. His kindness. His smile. His embarrassment. All the things he showed me and only me... They had to have been some kind of mistake.

We'd become family. We lived in the same house. I even listened to stories from his relatives who'd known him longer than I had. That's exactly why I knew that the way he was during middle school was extremely special. From his perspective, it might have been one of a few aberrations in his life.

It was the same for me as well. My past self had been extremely special, and we'd been special to each other. But...my past self couldn't have ever seen him like *this*... And now, I had it all figured out. We weren't special. We were just...normal.

The hot-headed period of our life had ended. We'd calmed down and faced reality. That's why I took a slight breath and stepped inside the study, an intimidating mountain of books on either side of me. My nose was immediately caressed by the sweet smell of old books.

As I got lost gazing at the piles of history, Mizuto turned to me. "Oh, it's you. What do you want?" His voice was even softer than usual. I tried to keep it together while I remembered why I had come.

"The bath... I came to get you."

"Oh... It's already this late?" He exhaled and closed the book he'd been reading at the desk.

It was a strange book. It looked like a hardcover, but there was nothing on the cover. The only thing it had was the title, which was messily inscribed. I thought it was a specialty book or something, but it was too thin for that. It had to have been only about a hundred pages or so.

"You're not going to use a bookmark?"

"Nah. I already remember all of it anyway."

"Huh?"

"This book can only be found here. I reread it every year."

"It's that rare?" It certainly did seem like there could be a lot of rare books here that could go for hundreds of thousands of yen. I started to panic and focused very hard to not step on any of the books.

"Yeah, it's rare in a sense. After all, there's only one copy in the world."

"Only one?"

"It was self-published, but the author didn't want to sell it. He just wanted a printed copy." Mizuto lightly stroked the book.

I took a few steps towards Mizuto, being careful not to step on any books. When I got close enough, I gave the title a closer look.

"*The Siberian Dancing Girl?*" That was all that was written; the author's name was nowhere to be found. I was familiar with the term

“dancing girl” from Ogai Mori’s book that we’d read in modern Japanese, but what was the “Siberian” part about?

“What’s it about?”

“It’s my great-grandfather’s autobiography.”

“His...autobiography?” I asked, confused.

“Kinda cringe, right?” Mizuto smirked.

Thinking about it, I remembered hearing something about a good number of middle and high schoolers wanting to publish their autobiographies back then.

“When I was little...maybe first grade or something, I stumbled upon this book. It had no author or anything, so it was super suspicious. But maybe that’s why I opened it in the first place. And now I reread it each year.”

“Is it that interesting?”

“Hm, as a reference, I think Keigo Higashino’s works are way more interesting. It uses a lot of big words, so it was almost impossible for me to read as a kid. Even so, I read it all. It was the first story I’d ever read from cover to cover by myself.”

I knew how he felt and how important that feeling was. Back when my biological dad was living with us, I’d found a book stuck in the back of our house’s bookcase. The book that I’d picked out on a whim had been written by a famous author, but it wasn’t considered a masterpiece or anything. Only real fans would know of its existence.

I’d only grabbed it because it had a title that would interest any elementary schooler—Agatha Christie’s *Murder in Mesopotamia*. It was only later that I learned what I’d read was a translation of the original.

Sure, it wasn’t as famous or as clever as her other books like *And Then There Were None* or *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, but that book that nobody but Agatha Christie fans would know about opened my world. It got me into the cleverness of closed room murders and the charm of great detectives.

Just as *Murder in Mesopotamia* opened my world, *The Siberian Dancing Girl* had opened Mizuto’s world. I fit myself into a small space between Mizuto and a pile of books and sat down on my knees next to him to look at the book.

“I get ‘Dancing Girl’ but why ‘Siberian’? Does it have to do with a railroad?”

“Have you ever opened a textbook?”

“Huh?”

“The Siberian internment camps. After the war, he spent three or four years detained in Russia.”

“Detained...”

It wasn’t a very familiar word to me and felt like an incredibly distant reality. *So our great-grandfather fought in the war...*

“So this is about his time spent as a prisoner in Siberia?”

“Kinda. Most of what he writes about is how there was so little food, he thought he was gonna die. And how it was so cold, he thought he was gonna die. And how he had to work so hard, he thought he was gonna die.”

“It’s all about him thinking he was going to die?”

“He also talks about how his friends died in front of him.”

My mouth clamped shut. *I’ve never been starved. I’ve never been so cold I feared for my life. I’ve never had to go through any physical hardships.* The closest would be gym class. Even after reading about this kind of stuff in our textbooks, it felt so unreal that it might as well have been from a different world entirely.

“So where does the ‘dancing girl’ come in?”

“Ogai Mori.”

“Oh, like Elise?”

“Yeah, it’s a reference to her, and how he got close with a girl in Siberia.”

“That’s...a kind of romantic story. Hopefully it didn’t turn out the same as Mori’s tale, though, or it’d be really tragic. So does that mean you have Russian blood in you?”

“Why don’t you read it then?” He held the book out to me.

“Huh?” I was caught completely off guard.

“Books are meant to be read. If you’re that curious, you should find out for yourself. As you can see, it’s not exactly long.”

“But... Are you sure?”

“Why not? I don’t see a problem.”

I cautiously took the book from him. It was as thin as it looked. The binding might have been thicker than the number of pages inside. There was a mysterious feeling to it. Not only that, but I also felt a sort of tenacity or maybe a deep-seated grudge in this book.

“How many people have read this?”

“Dunno. Probably only me. It was shoved way in the back of the bookcase when I found it. I doubt anyone even knows it exists.”

This book was Mizuto’s origin, and it was something that Mineaki-ojisan, Natsume-san, and of course Madoka-san had never read. Suddenly, I felt fear wash over me. *Is it really okay that I’m the one he’s letting read this?* Higashira-san’s face flashed in the back of my mind. Maybe *she* was supposed to be the one here reading this, not me. It felt all too natural...

“I’m gonna go take my bath.” Mizuto stood up and began heading out. “Whether you read it or not is up to you, but either way, just leave it there when you’re done.” Then he walked off through the creaky hallways, the sound becoming more and more distant.

I sat in that cavern of old books with a one-of-a-kind novel. Maybe

there should've been someone else sitting where I was, but *I* was the one here now. I looked at the title again and remembered Mizuto handing it to me. I needed to take three breaths before opening the book.

"The closer the end of my life is, the more I find myself reflecting on the past. I have lived a life filled with shame and regret. But there are no memories that cause my heart as much pain as the ones from Siberia, far away."

"My love for my wife is no weaker than it has always been. None of what I feel for her is a lie; however, the time I spent with her in that land burns as bright as the stars in the sky. Oh, Siberia. My unter den linden."

"As Ota Toyotaro did, so shall I write this to serve as a record of her. This will be the last piece of literature in my life; it is my repentance."

That's how *The Siberian Dancing Girl* began. Toyotaro Ota must have been a reference to the main character of the same name in Ogai Mori's short story, *The Dancing Girl*. During his study abroad trip, he meets a girl named Elise, and they fall in love. In the end, he betrays her in order to protect her family name and his way of life. He's probably the main character most hated by girls in Modern Japanese textbooks.

Seeing himself in Toyotaro's character, Kosuke-san wrote about his similar experiences. He'd had great support in his life and was walking the path of an elite. He'd even gotten close with the fiancée that his parents had chosen for him. However, he had no choice but to obey the conscription order sent to him. So he became a soldier and left his homeland.

The way he wrote his life story was by no means inferior to professional authors. He was sent to the front lines of Manchuria. There, he saw the end of the war. They received orders to surrender to Russia. He and the rest of the soldiers rejoiced that they would be able to return home and see their families and loved ones.

"The Russian soldiers screamed 'Tokyo Damoi!' My allies were confused at first, but I happily explained that 'damoi' is Russian for 'go home.' We could go home. We were excited to return to our home in the east, so we began to load our things onto the freight train. We realized too late that we were being taken west, not east."

The soldiers who had longed to see their homeland were sent to an internment camp in the frigid tundra. All they received was a piece of rye bread and soup that was essentially just salty water. On top of all of that, they were forced to do extremely physically taxing labor.

Kosuke was fortunate that he knew Russian. They tasked him with interpretation duties and spared him from manual labor. He also was able to eat better than the others. But being the person whose job was

to pass on Soviet messages to the Japanese soldiers earned him the ire of others, and Soviet Russia was a very heavily monitored society, so the very fact he could speak Russian put him under suspicion of being a spy.

Reading his story, I could vividly see the harsh, cold internment camp in Siberia. It felt like I was spectating someone's life, and that I was being dragged deeper and deeper into Kosuke Tanesato's memories and emotions.

"My love for literature was not destroyed by this foreign land. My books may have been confiscated, but they lived on inside me. As long as I remember them, I am enriched by their bountiful stories and nostalgic words."

"By doing so, perhaps if I ever come across someone similar to me, we may be able to share discussion. I've discovered that both my countrymen and foreigners alike have a love for literature. The great Dostoevsky has truly connected the hearts of humanity."

It was like embers in the midst of a blizzard. His small glimmer of joy within the horrible conditions. But there was nothing in his life that shone brighter than the eponymous Siberian dancing girl. Her name was Elena. She was the daughter of a Russian officer who had a love for literature.

He became her personal tutor and taught her Japanese. As he taught her, their hearts grew closer, especially as she was a student of literature, like her father. Somehow, I saw Mizuto and myself in them. Maybe it was the calm before the storm. The knowledge that they were going to break up. It was obvious from the beginning since he had a fiancée in Japan.

"There are many fellow literature lovers who would condemn Toyotaro Ota from 'The Dancing Girl' for his spineless actions. His entire life he'd been on a track that others had set for him. It was only when in a foreign country that he fell in love and walked his own path for the first time in his life."

"Ultimately, he did not possess the courage to permanently stray from the track laid for him. He clung to the helping hand of his friend and allowed Elise's mental condition to fall into disrepair. Many lambast him for being a weak-willed individual who was not a 'true man' when he failed to protect her."

"However, I felt great affinity and kinship for his way of life. Every time I exchanged words with Elena and saw her smile, I saw the strict face of my father in the back of my mind. His words repeated in my head. 'Make your family wealthy. Strengthen your country.' I'd never doubted those words."

"No matter how close I became with Elena, I could not imagine a future in which I betrayed my father to live the rest of my days here with

her. If the time came for me to depart, I could not imagine leaving my beloved in the same wretched state that Toyotaro had left his."

Time passed in the story, and Kosuke-san began a new fight against a democratic movement in the internment camp. It was democratic merely in name; in actuality, it was a Soviet brainwashing ploy to instill communist ideology in the prisoners. Since his old friends opposed this, Kosuke-san had no choice but to support them.

Kosuke-san's friends were put to even harsher work and harassed inside the camp. They were fatigued, starved, cold, and mentally broken.

"I couldn't save them, even though they'd saved me on many occasions. Even so, they never gave in. The image of their distant homeland was clear in their eyes."

This part of the book was all over the place, like it was depicting his own conflicted state of mind. But finally, after three years in Siberia, there seemed to be a chance to return to Japan.

Kosuke had become close with Elena and her father, and they recommended that he stay in Russia. They promised him a job and proposed that he marry Elena. Kosuke made the choice exactly as he'd imagined he would.

He didn't have the courage to throw away his country for a fleeting romance. He couldn't forget his family, country, or fiancée. Hearing this, Elena-san gave him a gentle smile.

"I pray that you find happiness," she said in the very Japanese that I'd taught her."

While turning his back on her, he made sure that his heart remembered these words.

"You may laugh at me as a spineless coward. You may claim I am not a true Japanese man. Even so, I will write my true memories. How I wish you'd stopped me."

That was how the book ended. I stared at the last page for a little. Then I heard a drop of water fall onto the aged page.

"Oh..." I quickly wiped my eyes. *When was the last time that a book made me cry?*

Maybe it was because it was a true story or because it was Mizuto's—our great-grandfather's story. Was it okay for an old book like this to get a little wet? I knew I needed to hurry up and wipe it, but that's when I saw another stain from a tear.

This was the printed copy of the written manuscript that Kosuke Tanesato had submitted, meaning that the tear left in this book wasn't from the writer, but the reader. Immediately, I imagined something. In a dark, dusty study, there sat a young boy crying over this book. I'd never seen him cry after reading something. Even so, I could see it as clearly as if I had been there.

The chattering of the adults felt so distant as I sat in this dimly lit room. It was as if this study was isolated from the world. It was as if *I'd been isolated from the world. Oh... He's lived in this world his entire life.*

"You're still here?" The moonlight cast a long shadow into the room. "You should at least shut the door. It still gets cold in the summer." Mizuto scoffed, effortlessly navigating the study. As he came closer, his eyes twitched upon seeing *The Siberian Dancing Girl*. "Wait, did you finish the entire book?"

I slowly nodded.

"Oh..." He let out a sigh before shutting his mouth.

Silence filled the room, leaving just the stagnant smell of the old books. There was no sound. My head was filled with thoughts of the young boy in this room in the past and the one in here now. Maybe that's why I ended up asking him something I never could have before.

"Have... Have you ever written a book?"

"Huh?" Mizuto was confused by my words, but I continued speaking.

"I have. When I was in elementary school, I wrote a mystery novel that was basically an Agatha Christie rip-off. It was horrible. The sentences didn't flow at all, the story, gimmicks—I took all of it from what I'd read. Even so, it's filled with the things that I loved. It's filled with 'me.'"

That's why I never got rid of it. Even when we moved, I made sure that I didn't lose it no matter how embarrassing it would've been if someone found it. I may have not wanted to read it again, but I couldn't bring myself to throw it away.

"Mizuto." His eyes flung open at this. "I want to read the book you wrote." Mizuto gaped at me before unsteadily exhaling.

"You... You just called me by my name without an honorific."

"We're siblings. There's nothing weird about it." I giggled.

Until now, I'd only called him that in my head. I'd always called him "Mizuto-kun" when we were in front of our parents, but I wanted to call him just "Mizuto" now. I wanted to call him that over and over. *I don't want you to disappear from my side. I don't want to disappear from your side. This way, we'll stop each other.*

"Let me read it, Mizuto. I'll let you read mine."

"Maybe... Someday." He looked away to hide his embarrassment.

"I'll wait as long as you want." *After all, I'm sure we'll be siblings until death does us part.*

The Ex-Couple Visits Family (2)

At the Passing of Twilight

“Hey, Mi—” I tried to say to Mizuto Irido. He was standing opposite me, holding the other end of the picnic blanket.

“Yeah?” Miz—my little stepbrother asked, furrowing his eyebrows in confusion. He was waiting for my signal, so we could lay it down for an impromptu rest area on this pebble-filled river shore.

“Well, uh, Mizuto-kun, how about we put it down here?”

“Uh... Yeah, sure.”

After laying the blanket down, we put rocks on each of the corners to keep it from moving.

I can't... I just can't... But it had been so easy to drop the honorific yesterday! *Does it really only take a matter of hours for me to lose my courage?*

Maybe I'd just gotten a little too drunk on the atmosphere in the study. I'd really felt closer to him—in a familial way—after learning more about his past. *Actually, wait. Why aren't you calling me by my name?!* Frustrated, I felt myself tremble at this unfairness.

“Take a dip, Chikuma. Don't worry; it's safe.” Madoka-san said, confirming the slow current of the river.

“O-Okay.”

“Watch out for rocks.”

“I know...”

We were currently at the river near the Tanesato house. The soft babble of the stream, the gentle sound of leaves rustling in the wind—it was all so serene. Even the strong rays of the sun felt comfortable. It was like an oasis in a desert.

According to what I'd heard, having a barbecue by the river was a Tanesato tradition during family gatherings. They might've been a very outgoing bunch, but with a spot like this in their backyard, it was only natural that they'd want to have a cookout or two with just family.

The adults had encouraged us to go ahead of them and play in the river. I'd also been asked by Mineaki-ojisan to drag Mizuto out of his great-grandfather's study. If I didn't, we probably wouldn't see him again until the trip ended.

Getting him out of there wasn't a problem, nor was bringing him here. But I noticed something during all this shuffling around: I hadn't

been dropping the honorific whatsoever, even though I'd decided to last night.

"Well, then..." Mizuto, who had changed into his swim trunks, put his stuff (a towel and a first aid kit) down, took off his sandals, and sat cross-legged on the picnic blanket. After getting comfortable, he pulled out a book and rested it on his lap.

"You really are true to yourself, no matter where you are..."

"Thanks, I guess."

I was jealous of how easy it was for him to move at his own pace regardless of location or company. He didn't care what other people thought about him. *Maybe I should've brought a book too...*

"Yume-chan, did you already put on your sunscreen and bug repellent?" Madoka-san asked, approaching me.

"O-Oh, I was just about to."

"Good! It'd be awful if that pretty skin of yours got damaged. I'm going to put some on now too." Madoka-san took off her sandals and began rummaging through her things and pulling out sunscreen.

She unzipped her jacket and out of it came a mature black bikini top. It didn't have any complex or unnecessary patterns or decorations; it was just a simple piece of black cloth covering two very large mounds. She had an hourglass figure—a thin waist and curves where it mattered. Her mature face only enhanced the allure of her black bikini.

She began spreading sunscreen across her arms. "Heh." She grinned at me. "Whaddya think? I've got quite the body, if I do say so myself."

"You're very pretty..."

"Huh? That's it? Most people have more of a reaction when they see my rack—boy or girl."

"Oh... I actually have a friend who has larger breasts, so..."

"What?! Really?! G-cup, or bigger?! N-No way, H?! Lemme meet her! I wanna fondle 'em!"

"No. That's sexual harassment—even if you *are* both girls."

"Aw, c'mon! Don't be so stingy!" Madoka-san frowned. Her reaction was so genuine, I couldn't help but laugh.

Why did people, Akatsuki-san included, want to grope big breasts so much? It was especially weird considering how big Madoka-san was already. *Wait, if she said, "G-cup or bigger," she has to be an F-cup.* No wonder she wore a black bikini.

I immediately glanced at Mizuto. He still had his nose in the book, so he probably hadn't stolen a glance...right? Either he'd looked away right off the bat, or he had absolutely no interest.

Suddenly, a conversation I'd had with Akatsuki-san over LINE last night came to mind. I'd had a good opportunity, so I'd posed a

question:

Me: Do you know who Kawanami-kun's first love was?

I wanted to get a general idea about what kind of people boys fell in love with for the first time.

Akatsuki☆: me

She'd answered immediately.

Me: Uh-huh. Okay.

Akatsuki☆: c'mon, girl, play along! don't leave me hangin

Me: So who was it?

Akatsuki☆: our preschool teacher iirc

Me: Who was yours?

Akatsuki☆: not telling

So it was Kawanami-kun. Akatsuki-san probably thought she'd hid her secret, but I knew. As hard as it was to get anything out of her, she wore her heart on her sleeve when it came to Kawanami-kun.

Anyway, I'd confirmed that boys fell for older girls...which was a little weird to say because when you're little, most people in the world are older than you. So statistically speaking, it was inevitable. Growing up, the only older girl around him would've been Madoka-san, so...

I felt a little torn up inside. It wasn't fair if he was my first love, but I wasn't his. It felt like I'd lost for some reason. *But you know what? Who cares who Mizuto fell in love with for the first time?* It didn't bother me one bit. Not at all. Not in the slightest.

"Here you go, Yume-chan," Madoka-san said, passing me the sunscreen while putting on bug spray.

"Thank you." I took off my sandals and looked for an empty spot.

The blanket wasn't too big, and was already occupied by Madoka-san and Mizuto. But the only open space was right between the two of them, so I reluctantly sat down.

I was wearing a light jacket over my swimsuit just like Madoka-san. I needed to take it off if I wanted to put sunscreen anywhere besides my legs. With that in mind, I very casually unzipped it, revealing the white floral-patterned bikini that I'd bought with Mizuto. Though it was a bikini, it differed from Madoka-san's, as mine had a short frilly skirt on the bottom. This was as much exposure as I

could handle.

I began squeezing out the lotion into my hands while glancing at Mizuto. As expected, his eyes stayed fixed on his book. He may have been acting calm now, but he'd been practically drooling when I bought this. Then again, he *did* have a very impressive ability to sense other people's gazes. There was a distinct possibility that he'd looked away the moment I glanced at him. Or maybe he got his fill when we bought it, so he wasn't interested anymore... *Argh, I don't know!*

"Whoa-ho!" Madoka-san hooted. "Yume-chan, you're so thin! Your waist is insane! You got any organs in there?!"

"O-Of course I do! I just don't have any muscles."

"You look great, though! I'm so jealous! I'm on the thin side, but your rack looks huge next to that skinny belly."

I quickly covered my breasts.

"I wanna rub 'em," Madoka-san said, leering at me. "Your swimsuit's cute too! You pick it out yourself?"

"Well, technically..."

"Technically"? Hm, there's a story here." Madoka-san's lips curled in a teasing grin. She leaned in and whispered, "I bet your boyfriend helped, huh?"

"No... We're not like that."

"Uh-huh. So you're not like that *yet*."

"Uh, 'yet' isn't exactly the right word." Like a reflex, I glanced at Mizuto.

"Huh?"

Madoka-san's eyes widened to the size of dinner plates. She quickly covered her mouth and shifted her eyes to Mizuto.

Oh... Oh, no!

"Wait, wait, wait. Really? *Him?!!*"

"No. No, no, no! Absolutely not. No!"

"Your reaction tells a different story..."

"I *swear* we're not like that! Please believe me!"

"Hmm, should I?" Madoka-san's eyes sparkled as she began grinning from ear to ear.

Is... Is this going to be okay? She won't tell mom or the others...right?

"Hm? But wait, I remember Yuni-san saying something about Mizuto-kun being close with a different girl... Oh my god, wait—is he...popular?!"

At the very least, from the way she was acting, I could surmise that Madoka-san more than likely did *not* have a thing for Mizuto. I still didn't know for certain, but it was enough for now. *Also... Really mom? Why do you keep leaking people's personal information?*

As I started to fall deeper into my thoughts, Madoka-san changed the topic. "Have you been to the beach yet, Yume-chan?" she asked,

returning to a normal voice.

“No, my friend says we shouldn’t.”

“Why not? You totally should!”

“She doesn’t want us to get hit on, so she’s vetoed the idea.”

“Aw, that’s a good friend you got there. Nice save. Getting perved on really takes the fun out of things.” Madoka-san said this so casually, I wondered if it happened to her often. Her usual outfit gave off such a subdued librarian vibe, but she’d apparently experienced her fair share of creeps. Then again, her body combined with her bikini would entice just about anyone. “So you bought that just to play in the river? What a waste.”

“But wearing a swimsuit in public is so embarrassing.”

“I totally get where you’re coming from. I really do. But you bought yourself something cute. It’s a shame not to show it off.”

“And I get where *you’re* coming from, but...”

“Really, you look great! You should at least show your friends! Here. Lemme take a picture for you, ’kay?”

“Wait, what?” True, nobody but Mizuto had seen my swimsuit, but there wasn’t any need to take a picture.

Madoka-san dug through my things and pulled out my phone as I agonized internally. *She’s so pushy.*

“Go ahead and take a selfie. Hm? Wait...” Before I could *strongly* object, a devilish smile crept across Madoka-san’s face. “Hey, Mizuto-kun? Sorry to bother you, but could you take a picture for me?” she asked, holding out my phone to him.

“Huh?!” But I’d reacted a second too late. What the heck had she meant by that?!

Mizuto slowly looked up at the phone being held out to him and Madoka-san’s grinning face. *It’s okay. There’s no way that Mizuto would agree—not when she interrupted his precious reading time. Surely, he’ll—*

“Okay.”

Excuse me?! Mizuto shut his book and took the phone from Madoka-san. Why did you respond to her?! You always ignore me when you’re reading! Why her?!

“Thanks! Oh wait, I don’t know how to unlock it.”

Oh, right! My phone’s protected by a passcode. As long as I keep it a secret—

“Hmph.” Mizuto scoffed and quickly entered four digits into the phone, revealing my home screen.

“Wh-Why do you know my passcode?!”

“Why indeed. Maybe you’re just *that* simple a person.”

Sure, he knows the significance of those four numbers, but still, I can’t believe he guessed it so quickly!

“Heh heh. Well done, minion!” She snickered. “Okay, up and at

'em." Madoka-san was wearing a very unscrupulous grin as she pulled us to our feet. Mizuto stood across from me, readying my phone. "Okay, Yume-chan, stand right there and look at the camera. How about... Hm, you can do a peace sign if you want, but how about you hold your hands behind you?"

Huh? She's deciding my pose for me? But I didn't have time to voice my disapproval, so instead I obediently did as told. Mizuto's eyes were focused on the phone screen, watching me through the camera. I grew itchy thinking about how his fresh gaze was pinned on me through the inorganic lens. *This is really embarrassing...*

"It's like a reversal of back then," Mizuto mumbled.

"A reversal"? Had there been a situation when I forcefully took pictures of Mizuto...? Oh, right. After our aquarium date. The evidence was still saved on my phone. I could vividly see him in the outfit that Kawanami-kun had picked out and the glasses I'd had him wear. He'd been the spitting image of a hot tutor. *Wait, so he's going to do the same thing to me right now...?*

"Oh, that's good! Take the pic!"

I was snapped out of my thoughts by the sound of a camera shutter. *W-Wait! I wasn't ready!* Mizuto wordlessly stared at the screen.

"How's it look? Lemme see!" Madoka-san wrapped around Mizuto and peered at the phone. "Oh! Well, well, well..."

I moved over to take a peek as well, only to be met with a swimsuit-clad girl with her arms behind her back, slightly leaning forward, flush in the face while looking up. *Uh... This is kinda like...*

Madoka-san snickered. "Grats, Yume-chan. You've got a pic that totes implies you're in a relationship."

Noooo! The angle, my expression, my pose—it *really* gave a "my boyfriend took this pic" feel!

"Nonono. I don't want a picture like that! Why would I want them to think I'm in a relationship when I'm not?! What's the point?!"

"'Cuz it's fun?"

"'Cuz it's fun?! " *What does that mean?! Socialites are beyond comprehension!*

"Aw, it's okay. Chill. Just caption it with 'Onii-chan took this picture for me' with a cute little tilde at the end, and you'll have your friends eating out of your hands tryin' to figure out who you're talking about. The superiority you'll feel will be amazing! It's a total win-win! Hm...wait. Who's the older one between you two?"

"Me," Mizuto and I said at the same time, making Madoka-san cackle.

What am I supposed to do about this picture? I'm not very interested in the so-called "superiority" aspect.

"No need to think too hard about it. Just put it up on Insta.

Sharing memories with friends is important,” Madoka-san said, returning my phone to me.

Sharing memories with friends, huh? I got the feeling she had a point. But I wasn’t about to throw this into the group chat with the other girls from school. I had no intention of dealing with the headache that would ensue from the rumors. If I posted it on social media, I could see it leaking and becoming a problem.

After racking my brain, I came up with a solution. I decided to share it in the group chat between me, Higashira-san, and Akatsuki-san.

Yume: Playing in the river makes me feel like a kid again.

It didn’t take even a minute before my message was “read.” A little while later, I got a response.

Akatsuki☆: what a coinkydink! i’m at the pool!

Huh? Pool? Without me? Had I been ditched? These negative thoughts were quickly dispelled by a picture that Akatsuki-san sent of her in a frilly yellow swimsuit. It was really cute. The frills, though... They were probably meant to draw attention away from the size of her chest.

She was also holding ice cream while making a peace sign. This was like *the* ultimate picture of summer enjoyment. I knew she didn’t want us to go to the beach because she didn’t want anyone hitting on me, but did that mean she could go to a very similar place so long as I wasn’t there? I had mixed feelings. But then I realized something. The angle that the picture had been taken from was really high.

Akatsuki-san wasn’t necessarily tall, so almost every picture taken of her by someone else would be at an angle...but this angle was *obtuse*. The person who took it must’ve been thirty centimeters or so taller than her. Also, the shadow cast on the poolside helped me figure out who it was. *I know that hairstyle*. This was real. I knew I had to take a screenshot, and it’s good that I did because in the next moment, I saw the following message in its place.

Akatsuki☆: Message deleted by user.

Akatsuki☆: sorry. forget about that.

It’s a little late for that..

Yume: I took a screenshot.

Akatsuki☆: ?

Yume: Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone.

Akatsuki☆: wait

Yume: Sorry to ruin your fun, but enjoy the pool!

Akatsuki☆: no, seriously, wait! it's not what you think!

What do you mean?! A boy and a girl going to the pool together are obviously on a date!

“What are you smirking about? So creepy.”

“Heh heh. Look at this.” I really wanted to share the progress of those two, so I stood next to Mizuto and showed him the screenshot.

“Oh...” Mizuto immediately noticed the incriminating detail.

“What? That’s all you have to say?”

“I don’t care about their relationship.”

“You should care a little! He’s your friend!”

“According to him.”

Before I knew it, we were having a normal conversation, but surprisingly, there still wasn’t a good time to say his name. I’d forgotten one incredibly important thing, though. There was one more person in our group chat.

Ding. There was the sound of a notification. I reflexively tapped on it with Mizuto still next to me. My phone switched back to LINE, and waiting there was a certain picture.



It was Higashira-san in a school swimsuit.

Both of us stared at the screen in silence. I remembered something: our school didn't have a pool, meaning we didn't have a school swimsuit. She had to have been wearing her middle school swimsuit. That explained why it was so tight on her.

It had to have been digging into her butt—I mean, her breasts were practically spilling out! Also, I wasn't sure if it was uncomfortable for her or if she was just embarrassed, but her face was red and her eyes were moist. She was doing her absolute best to extend her arm to take the picture.

Akatsuki☆: why'd you send such a dirty pic all of a sudden?

Yeah...there's really no room for interpretation here.

Izanami: I was under the impression we were competing with implied relationship pictures in our swimsuits.

Akatsuki☆: it's not a competition! also, your pic is just a selfie. there's nothing to imply!

Izanami: I attempted to set my phone on my bookshelf, but I was unable to get the angle right, so I ultimately took the picture myself. How are you two so skilled at getting it to look like a guy took it?

I'm so sorry, Higashira-san... It's because our pictures were taken by guys. I looked away from my phone and cautiously asked Mizuto, who was currently sighing with his head in his hand, "Should I tell her?"

"I guess..."

I suddenly felt filled with confidence.

Yume: Sorry, Higashira-san

Yume: Mizuto saw

Izanami: Message deleted by user.

I could vividly imagine Higashira-san silently breaking down in her room. *I'm really, really sorry.*

The meats sizzled loudly as they were placed on top of the grill. There were even more ringing out near the riverside, making a symphony of sizzles, arousing the hunger of everyone around.

“These are done. Eat up!” Natsume-san replaced the cooked skewers with uncooked ones as fast as they were taken off the grill. I’d heard she was close to seventy years old, but she was even more active than I was.

I’d assumed this barbecue would be a smaller scale affair, but the Tanesato men had brought six grills. Where’d they even get these? No way they owned this many, right?

“One of Natsume-obaachan’s friends runs a campsite, so she’s borrowing them for cheap,” Madoka-san said through a mouthful of meat. “That’s the power of being a former local celebrity. When I grow up, I wanna be rich too!”

“Mikado-kun’s gonna cry if he hears you say that, Madoka.”

“I’m just kidding! Heh heh,” she snickered.

Who’s Mikado-kun? I tilted my head in confusion.

“Ah.” Madoka-san looked at someone. “Aw, Chikuma! Clean your mouth!”

“Huh?” Chikuma-kun, who’d been happily eating away, had sauce around his mouth.

“Aw, how’d you get like that? Where’s the tissues...?”

“Oh, I have a handkerchief,” I said, pulling it out of my jacket’s pocket. I crouched down and began wiping Chikuma-kun’s mouth. His eyes widened, but he didn’t struggle or protest. *Good boy.* If this was Mizuto, he’d have slapped the handkerchief away and messily wiped his face with his arm or something. “There. All better.”

Chikuma-kun looked like he wanted to say something, but nothing came out.

Madoka snickered. “Aw, come on Chikuma. Thank your Yume-oneechan.”

“Th... Thank you...”

“No problem!” I said, flashing a bright smile at him.

“Wah!” Chikuma-kun’s face turned red and he hid behind Madoka-san. *He’s really trying to avoid me.* I was happy to have a cute little brother type who was both simultaneously like and unlike Mizuto.

“You’re such a sinful girl, Yume-chan,” Madoka-san said through a snicker.

“‘Sinful’?” *What did I even do?*

“I feel for you, Chikuma. But this is a good life experience.” Madoka-san definitely was implying something, but I wasn’t sure what. “Yume-chan, why don’t you hang out with Mizuto-kun?” she said, turning her attention to the guy sitting away from everyone on the picnic blanket.

“That’s kind of random... Why me?”

“Usually, I try to hang out with him, but I get the feeling that he

doesn't want me doing that anymore. Ha ha ha." I was surprised that she could laugh so energetically at someone not wanting to be around her.

Mizuto was once again nose-deep in a book. He didn't look like he had any intention of joining the barbecue. Nobody from the Tanesato family seemed to want to force him to participate either. He had his own designated place. They understood what kind of person he was.

"Okay, fine."

Madoka-san suddenly went to the grill and loaded it with meat and vegetables.

I know she can drink a lot, but can she eat a lot too? But she's so thin. Did all the fat go to her breasts?! I started to wonder more and more about it, but my thoughts were interrupted by Madoka-san presenting me with a plate.

"Here you go."

"Huh? I have my own plate." I lifted my plate that still had meat on it to show her.

"Oh, no, this is for Mizuto-kun."

"Huh?"

"Give this to him for me?" she snickered through a playful smile. *She must still be misunderstanding something. We don't like each other. We hate each other. Our relationship isn't like th—*

"Come on. Give it to him before it gets cold."

"Okay..." Maybe it'd be more suspicious if I'd made a big deal about it. *I'd better just give it to him.*

The sky was tinged orange, the river darkened by the long shadows from the trees. The only thing that hadn't changed was Mizuto, who was still reading.

"Mi..." I was still hesitating to call him by his first name without an honorific. More than being embarrassed, I just wasn't used to it. *I bet Madoka-san wouldn't hesitate in the slightest.* Thinking about that, I came up with an idea. "Mizuto-kuun." I tried changing my voice to be higher pitched and brighter in an attempt to imitate Madoka-san.

"Barf." Mizuto didn't even spare me a glance.

Did he know it was me from the sound of my footsteps? That didn't make me happy at all. I took off my sandals and sat next to him.

"Here." I held the plate out to him. That got him to look up from his book, but it didn't get him to put it down. "Don't want it?"

"I mean, I'll take it, but..." Judging by how far he'd gotten, I deduced that he'd entered the climax of the book. That was enough to make anyone forget their hunger. In that case...

"Heh." I snickered.

Mizuto shot me a cautious look. *Oh no. Madoka-san's snickering's*

rubbed off on me! I picked up a piece of meat with my chopsticks. “Say ‘ah.’”

“Huh?”

“Come on. ‘Ahh.’”

We could hear the booming laughter of the adults in the background. Mizuto glanced over at them.

“It’ll be fine. It’s dark. No one’s gonna notice,” I said.

“That’s not the problem here...”

“Then what is?”

“Well...”

“Here.”

“Mmff?!” I took my chance to shove a piece of meat in his mouth.

Mizuto glared at me as he chewed. Then he made a loud gulping sound before resuming speaking. “That’s dangero—”

“Oh, no, your mouth is sooo messy.”

“Mmff!”

I wiped his mouth with my handkerchief, then giggled. “You’re almost as cute as Chikuma-kun when you don’t talk.”

“Then go wipe *his* mouth.”

“Aw, are you scared that he’s going to take your precious Oneechan from you?”

“Barf.”

I couldn’t hold back my giggling. He’d always been so annoying, but now he was like a cute little brother.

He’d either gotten tired of being fed by me or he’d reached a good stopping point, because Mizuto closed his book and took the plate and chopsticks from me. I watched him stuff his face with meat and vegetables.

“Hey, Mi—” The words got caught in my throat. *Seriously?! Why can’t I do it?!*

“Why do you keep calling me ‘Mi’? As far as nicknames go, that’s new.”

“Y-You noticed?!”

“Duh. I had to prepare myself for you to call me by my first name without any honorifics today.”

I guess we both needed to prepare ourselves in our own ways.

“I... I want you to call me by my first name without any honorifics first.”

“Why?”

“It’s not fair if I’m the only one dropping the honorific.”

“You started this. Why should I care?”

“You should, unless you’re okay with people thinking I’m the older sibling.”

“Why would that happen?”

“If you keep calling me ‘Yume-san,’ but I don’t use an honorific with you, it’ll make you look like the younger one.”

“Dammit... That’s low...” Mizuto scowled as he admitted defeat, pursing his lips. “Yu—”

“Yu?”

Mizuto fell silent.

“As far as nicknames go, that’s new.”

“Shut it!” he growled before angrily munching his potatoes. Was he embarrassed? Was he lamenting something? Maybe the fact that my old name wasn’t a thing anymore...

“Morning, Ayai.”

“Have you read that book, Ayai?”

“I like you, Ayai.”

“Ayai.”

Every time he’d called me by that name, there was always such a gentle ring to it. That name would never come back. It was just a memory of my first love. I’ll admit that it hurt my heart. Maybe that’s why I couldn’t get it out of my head. But I couldn’t let myself cling to my lingering feelings.

We both had the last name Irido now—not because we’d gotten married, but because we’d become stepsiblings. Our past relationship was trifling; being siblings was our entire identity now.

I tilted my head. “Wait, what happened to those rules we made? When was the last time we followed them?”

“Oh, right. Our sibling rules.”

“We’ve gotten used to being siblings, so we haven’t slipped up.”

“You think so? I think one of us could’ve broken a rule today, though.”

“Huh?”

“Leering at your sibling in a swimsuit isn’t really sibling-like, right?” he said.

Oh...right. I see. Wait... Huh?

“Why are you pointing that out?”

“Because you’re a pain in my ass. Does that make you feel better? Now you know why I wasn’t looking at you in your swimsuit.”

“Hmph.” I looked away from him as he shot me a teasing smirk. If I said that it did indeed make me feel better, well, I would’ve broken a rule.

“Whatever. Let’s keep the rules in mind from now on, especially while we’re out here. It’d be a major headache if any of these people found out about us.”

“Right... You have a point.”

I glanced at his plate, which had surprisingly become empty. He was now staring idly at it.

“Still hungry? I can get you more.”

“Yeah, well...” he said nervously, glancing at my hands. “Let’s go get you some more too while we’re at it.”

“Huh? I don’t—”

“Are you planning on turning into a skeleton? Eat.” He said this in a forceful tone, but I understood the reason behind that. He didn’t want to go alone.

My lips curled into a smile. “If you call me by my name, I’ll go with you.”

“Tsk.” Mizuto grimaced and averted his gaze. After some time, he slowly stood up and looked down at me. He stretched his hand out, wearing a serious look on his face. “Let’s go, *Yume*.”

“Fweh?” He caught me off guard, and a weird sound escaped my throat. I felt a chill run down my spine. For some reason, I wanted to run away.

Mizuto kept looking down on me and snorted, his lips curling into a sneer. “You lose.”

“Huh...?”

“Let’s go, little sister.”

“Wha— Hey!” *This goddamn guy!* He should’ve lost too. He couldn’t call me by just my first name without putting on an act. *You should lose too!* “Okay, Onii-chan!”

“Heh.” *What the hell?!* He used to get so flustered by me calling him that, but he was so unfazed, he snorted at it?!

I couldn’t call him “Irido-kun” anymore, nor could he call me “Ayai.” We’d shaken off the memories of our past. We’d gotten rid of our lingering feelings and accepted who we were now...or at least we should have. We should’ve, but as we walked towards our relatives, I started to think. *Why do I find myself wanting to hold his hand all the more right now?*

“The country roads can be dangerous. Be careful.”

After the barbecue ended, the sun had begun to set behind the mountains. Mizuto and I walked along the empty road while looking at the rice paddies, red from the sunset, and the long black shadows cast by the transmission towers. Even though metal was man-made, it felt perfectly normal among all the nature that stretched as far as the eye could see.

The cars the family had come in only had enough room for the older people, Chikuma-kun who’d fallen asleep, and Madoka-san, leaving us, the two young ones, to walk home. Mizuto stayed maybe three steps in front of me, acting as a guide. We ended up keeping this distance between each other as we trotted along the asphalt road.

“We really are in the middle of nowhere,” I said, looking at him.

“I’ve never thought of it as an inconvenience. We only ever stay for five days. It goes by in a flash reading books.”

“I have a question. Do you—” I closed the space between us by one step. But even if I’d gotten bolder in my actions, my mouth hadn’t gotten the message. “Do you not like your relatives?” Only two steps separated us. He didn’t turn to me despite how close I was to him.

“Hm, I don’t *dislike* them,” he said calmly. “If anything, I’m indifferent towards them.”

“That’s mean.”

“How am I supposed to care about people I don’t know? I don’t know the Tanesato family, and I don’t know how to address any of them. A lot of their names don’t match their faces either, if I’m being honest.”

“What about Madoka-san? You two are close in age. She looked after you when you were little too, or at least that’s what she said.”

For some reason, Mizuto paused before he answered. “True... She did hang around me a lot. If I remember right, I was in kindergarten, so she must’ve been in elementary school.”

When you’re young, people older than you look a lot bigger than they actually are. One day you realize that the older girl you thought was reliable was actually nothing but a little girl. Madoka-san might’ve been like a mother to him.

He never knew his mother, so hers was the closest thing to a mother’s love that he’d known. She might’ve been the only one that treated him with a mother’s love too...

“Hey...” I gulped. For some reason, my throat was moist. “Kinda off topic, but...” I needed some courage. The urge to ask him and the urge to keep it to myself fought back and forth inside me. But I’d shaken off my lingering feelings. I took an extra step forward. “What kind of person was your first love?”

There was only one step left between us. I could reach him if I leaned forward. He still didn’t turn around. Instead, he let out a nostalgic laugh.

“Someone who laughed a lot.”



Suddenly, I heard a familiar snicker in the back of my head.

“I see...”

Do you remember your past self, Yume Irido? She was a bona fide plain girl—a quiet, unsociable crybaby. Smiles didn’t suit her at all. That was who you were—who *I* was.

I see. Madoka-san really was his first love. The space between us grew step by step. The sun had almost fully set. The twilight had passed, leaving only the dark of night in its place.

The Childhood Friends Go to the Pool

“Nice camouflage.”

There’s a certain undeniable fact that makes my hair stand on end whenever I recall it: I had a so-called girlfriend during a certain period of middle school. She was also my childhood friend, so dating her felt like an extension of that friendship.

It’s not that crazy a story when you think about it. We were neighbors and raised almost like we were siblings. I wasn’t supposed to have girls over, but she knew my parents, so she was an exception. It was a simple process of elimination that she was the girl I went out with.

I had no choice but to pick that red-flag psycho. That’s the only hand that fate dealt me. If we hadn’t been childhood friends, if we hadn’t been neighbors... Maybe things wouldn’t have ended up so shitty between us. But hindsight’s twenty-twenty, right?

Despite what we might’ve wished for, reality was different. She got attached to me, and I couldn’t bring myself to push her away. I had a bone to pick with my elementary school self. He could’ve been a little less concerned with the well-being of others.

I couldn’t remember the exact last time this happened or the nitty-gritty of it, but back when we were in elementary school, I went to the pool with A-chan—I mean, Akatsuki. We probably went with our parents; they wouldn’t have let us go alone.

Most people might’ve been there to have fun, but we sure weren’t. We were there for a very serious reason: to teach Akatsuki how to swim. That might be surprising, considering how athletic she was now, but she didn’t know how to swim back then, and we had a test in the middle of summer vacation to prepare for.

Being the nice guy with Buddha-like patience and godlike smarts that I was, I couldn’t help but take pity on my poor childhood friend. I decided to help her with her special training. Being the more experienced one, I got into the pool first and held out my hand. She stood at the poolside, nervously staring at the water.

“Come on, I got you,” I said, trying to calm her down. “Nothin’ to be scared of.”

“Okay...”

She slowly took my hand and dipped her toes into the water. Honestly, I’m still impressed by how admirable a person she used to be. Seriously. If I tried to teach her how to swim now, she’d step on my face.

“Can you touch the bottom?”

“Yeah. I’m okay.”

I was filled with pride as she clung to me. I was so young, mentally and physically, but hey, good for you, kid! Thanks to your stupid need to be validated, you unwittingly laid the foundation for our future hell!

I held her hand as we slowly eased into working on her getting used to putting her head underwater. The power of the internet meant even dumb kids like us knew the proper steps when learning how to swim. Kids can get serious about things when they want to.

“You’re okay. Don’t be so tense.”

But the fact that we were kids remained. I had no attention span. As I held her hand while she kicked her legs in the water, I was distracted by something. From the adult side of the pool, I heard a scream and then a loud splash. I’d gotten distracted by the waterslide. Akatsuki wasn’t stupid either—she could tell.

“Ko-kun, you can go if you want,” she said, water dripping off her face. “I can practice kicking by myself.”

“Don’t be stupid.” I grabbed her hand again and immediately followed up with, “Waterslides suck if you’re alone. You’re gonna learn to swim in no time! Then we can go together!”

“Oh...” Akatsuki looked up at me. Her eyes darted from side to side before she submerged half her face. “Thanks...”

“Don’t thank me. Course I’ll wait for you!”

Of course, Akatsuki didn’t learn how to swim in one day. We kept up the lessons for some time after. We’d practice staying submerged while taking baths together and I’d stay with her during swim class. By the time summer vacation ended, she was able to swim ten meters.

Needless to say, I didn’t get to go on the waterslide that summer despite really wanting to. But if I’d left her alone to go by myself, it would’ve resulted in another annoying problem. That much was guaranteed.



The bus leaving Uji Station to go to Taiyogaoka was incredibly packed. Akatsuki used her size to her advantage and secured a seat, leaving me to stand and hold a pole next to her and fight against the swarm of passengers.

“Excuse me, young miss. Would you consider letting an old man

sit?" I asked in a cool voice, filled with spite.

"Sorry," she started, her voice sweet but filled with even more spite than mine. "I know your body's the only thing you've got going for you. Must be so hard on you when those muscles are only for show."

"Am I really being lectured by the person who trains her pecs in the hopes of supporting her nonexistent tits?"

"What do you mean 'nonexistent'?! They're light, fluffy, *and* bouncy!"

This poor girl. She's delusional.

And with that, the two of us, sworn enemies who were also coincidentally childhood friends, endured the packed bus. Why? Because we were going out to have fun. We were going to enjoy our summer vacation like the young high schoolers we were. And where exactly were we going, you might ask? Why, the pool, of course.

With the Irido siblings on vacation, we were left with nothing to do. This outing was merely a way for us to kill time. In an attempt to continue ignoring our summer assignments, she'd invited me to the pool out of the blue.

"It's hot. Let's go to the pool. You can be my guy-repellent," she'd said.

As much as I'd wanted to ask her what guys would want to hit on a shrimp like her, I knew that'd earn me a hard kick.

At any rate, I'd wanted a change of pace, so I'd decided against messing with her. Besides, I figured there'd be loads of couples to observe at the pool. And that's how I ended up going with her. Real talk, I thought she'd invited other people, but in the end, it was just the two of us going on a pool date... A date, huh? There was something really weird about calling it that when it came to the two of us.

I stared off into the distance, waiting for Akatsuki outside of the women's changing room. As I waited, girl after girl came out, passing me by. I was well aware that I'd have a psychogenic response if I felt any romantic feelings, but...I was a guy. I couldn't *not* look at them.

At the very least, I wasn't as thirsty as I had been in middle school. Even so, I still found my eyes drawn to their bouncy assets. There were other guys here who were presumably waiting for their girlfriends, but they were no different than I. They knew if they stared, they'd more than likely be labeled as some kind of pervert, so they did their best to sneak glances.

And then, out of all the youthful hotties in the changing room, came a ponytailed shrimp. She was practically invisible; nobody was looking at her. She was wearing a yellow bikini and had a waterproof

pouch hanging off her neck, which had her phone in it. When she saw me, she leisurely walked over. *She walks like an older girl, at least.*

“Sorry for the wait.”

“You finished changing already? I guess I got so caught up in looking at the couples here in their bathing suits that I lost track of time.”

“Ew. Die.” As she verbally berated me, she gazed up at me as if she were waiting for something.

Let me say that I’m not Mizuto Irido. I knew exactly what I had to say and when. Akatsuki’s bikini was girly, the tube top covering her chest extremely frilly. They helped hide the certain curves that her body lacked, making her overall silhouette more appealing. The bottom half of her bikini was a kind of skirt, also adorned with short frills that showed off her very healthy thighs. Apparently, she was proud of her legs. Taking everything I saw into account, there was just one thing to say.

“Nice camouflage.”

“Tell me what exactly you think I’m camouflaging!”

“Gah!” Akatsuki’s small hands quickly wrapped around my neck and began choking me. *Chill! Chill, you goddamn death-grip gnome!*

Fortunately for me, it wasn’t long before she let go. She let out a short “hmp” and looked away. But then she glanced at my chest.

“What? You finally jealous of my chest?”

“Like hell, you moron! Forget it. I was just kinda thinking that it’s a waste that you don’t play sports.”

“Oho. Do my daily workout muscles really get you that hot?”

I might’ve not played any sports, but I made sure to do the bare minimum muscle training to keep me looking good. If Irido put on a little more muscle, he’d definitely be a good-looking guy. *Now that’s a waste.* Either way, though, Akatsuki definitely didn’t have any interest in my body anymore. Just as I was thinking that, I saw her look up at me.

“What if I said that they do?” she asked, almost as if she were sulking.

I felt my insides churning.

“Please stop...”

If my hives started acting up, I wouldn’t be able to hide them while wearing swimming trunks

“Then keep your stupid comments to yourself.” Then Akatsuki walked towards the pool, gesturing for me to follow.

Dammit. This is so unfair! All she had to do was give me an honest compliment, and I was put in a critical condition. I couldn’t accept this, so I came up with a plan to get her back.

“Wait up.”

“What?” she asked, turning around, her ponytail swinging with her.

“Your swimsuit looks really cute.”

“Huh...” Akatsuki froze for a second, her mouth wide open. In the next moment, she’d turned around. “I see...”

Crap. I messed up. I lightly rubbed my left arm. That hurt me too.



“Mm... More.”

“Are you sure? It won’t hurt?”

“I’ll be fine... Just do it harder... It still doesn’t feel good yet.”

“Okay, don’t come crying to me later. Get ready...” And with that, I put my entire body weight into the hand I was pressing against Akatsuki’s back. Her upper body almost folded in between her outstretched legs.

“How’re you so flexible? You an octopus or something?”

“Impressed? I’ve been praised by girls in the gymnastics club too—ow, ow, ow, ow! Too much! Too much!”

The satisfaction I got from Akatsuki screaming and desperately trying to tap out was immense, so I finally took my hand off her. *That’s what you get for all the humiliation you’ve put me through.*

Akatsuki sat up and stared at me. “You.”

“What?”

She suddenly pulled my hand and lay me facedown on the ground.

“You need to do your stretches too,” she said, mounting my back.

“Uh, this isn’t a stretch, it—ow, ow, ow, ow!” She pulled my arm from behind like she was trying to rip it out of my shoulder. This violent display has been brought to you by the letter U, which was coincidentally the unnatural shape my back was being bent into.

Her surprisingly thick thighs tightly locked my hips in place, giving me no room to escape. *Shit, this hurts. My back is making a creaking noise!*

“All right, let’s go again...” *Ding!* “Hm?” Akatsuki turned around and checked her phone. *Did she get a message on LINE or something?*

“It’s Yume-chan! Ehe heh heh!” Laughter reminiscent of that of a creepy old man rang out.

“Gross— Gah!” She smacked my head, still grinning mischievously. *You’re always saying it! Why can’t I?!*

Suddenly Akatsuki gasped and stopped breathing for a second. Her eyes widened and fixed on her phone, closely looking at a picture. Her body began to shake violently.

“What’s the matter? Did they accidentally send you a picture of them kissing or something?” I asked, secretly hoping that they had. *There’s no way they’re capable of doing anything like YouTube couples, though.*

“S-Swimsuit...” Akatsuki mumbled in a shaky voice.

“What? Did your top fall off or somethin’?”

I rotated my body in between her legs so I could sit up. As far as I could tell, there didn’t seem to be anything wrong with the strings or hooks of her bikini or anything. I tilted my head in confusion, but

Akatsuki leaned into my chest.

“What... What should I do? I need to reply. All I can think about are things that’ll creep her out.”

“Not really sure what’s goin’ on, but why don’t you just tell her what you’re doin’ right now?” I suggested.

“That’s it!”

“Wah—”

Akatsuki shoved me out of the way and shot to her feet. “Wait a sec,” she said, before running off somewhere. After a few minutes, she came back with ice cream. *Looks like mint chocolate chip.*

“What’s with the ice cream? Where’s mine?”

“None for you. I’m trying to show off how I’m enjoying summer break just like the other girls.”

Why do you need to try to show that off? Aren’t you already in the middle of enjoying summer? Then again, Akatsuki was unironically not like the other girls.

She pulled her phone out of the waterproof pouch and shoved it against me. “Get a cute pic of me!”

“The subject of the picture’s gotta be cute first.”

“I’ll make myself cute then. Right now!” she declared. Akatsuki held her ice cream next to her face, made a peace sign with her other hand, and brightly grinned.

I don’t know what to say. I’m surprised she can change that quickly. It’s hard to believe that she’s the same person who was about to break my arms off.

“How do I look? Cute?”

“Uh-huh. You’re so cute. *Super* cute,” I said unenthusiastically.

“I mean it! Am I?”

“You’re so cute!” Any more than this, and it’d be torture. I wasn’t sure what was going on with her, but I knew I needed to take care of this sooner than later. I held up her phone, pointed it down at her, and pushed the shutter button.

“Done. This good?”

“Uh... Good enough! Send!” Akatsuki pressed some buttons on her phone after getting it back from me and then let out a relieved sigh before taking a lick of her ice cream.

“Another pic, another day of successfully protecting my normie-high-school-girl image.”

“Huh?” I snickered.

“What’re you laughin’ at?!” She aimed for my weak point, but I was able to barely evade her.

If you’re a real normie, then where’s your boyfriend? Ha ha... Wait. Boyfriend?! I thought back to the picture I took.

“Uh... Hey, so that picture... Did you already send it?”

“Yeah, why?”

“You sure you should’ve?”

“Why?”

“It’s pretty easy to tell that a guy took it from the angle. Also, you can see my shadow.”

Akatsuki froze. Her ice cream fell to the ground. It was like her brain had stopped functioning. Then she furiously began moving her fingers across her phone’s screen.

“Delete. Delete. Delete. Delete. That never happened! Aaagh!”

Akatsuki suddenly fell to her knees.

She’s all over the place. You’re lucky this is a busy pool, otherwise someone’d definitely report you.

“Why, Yume-chan, why?!”

“What now?”

“I deleted the picture, but she took a screenshot!”

Wow, heads-up play, Irido-san. Good idea, keepin’ the evidence.

“Why are you so calm?!”

“Why should I care? It’s true that the two of us are here together. It’s not good to lie to your friends.”

“You don’t care that they know you’re here with me? They might think we’re dating.”

“Of course I care. But I don’t care enough to keep it a secret from my friends.”

“Oh, okay...”

This is kinda embarrassing. I looked away from her. We’d let a lot of things out into the open during the study camp. But it’s not like things had gone back to normal for either of us. My “allergies” hadn’t disappeared, for one. Honestly, I’d tilt my head in confusion if anyone asked me whether I liked Akatsuki. It was as if the very notion of romantic feelings had disappeared from me. But we *were* childhood friends. There was no denying that.

“Pfft.” Akatsuki suddenly did a spit take while looking at her phone.

“What happened?”

“Nothing!” Akatsuki frantically hid the phone against her chest as I tried to peek. *Sure, I guess it’s a little rude to look at someone else’s phone without permission.*

“What the heck is Higashira-san doing? Aha ha ha!”

Apparently, that big-boobed hindrance had done something incredibly stupid without realizing it again. *I’m glad you’re getting such a good laugh out of this.* Akatsuki was lonesome; she’d only really started making friends in high school. She probably hadn’t been able to interact with people before that. Previously, she had made superficial friends.

The only problem was that when she did open up to someone, it was to the extreme. She'd never fixed how dependent she became on others. I saw hell thanks to that, but at the very least, she seemed to be able to keep a safe distance from Irido-san and Higashira. That being said, I knew she was totally just one small push away from going full-on psycho chick for Irido-san, so I had to make sure to keep an eye on her. She'd gotten a lot better since middle school, though.

If she kept up this improvement, maybe she'd stop interfering with the Irido siblings. *Oh god, that'd be great! With them all the way out in the boonies, there's no way for Akatsuki or anyone to interfere.* I could only imagine what kind of developments were happening between them.

"Hm?" Akatsuki furrowed her brows in confusion.

"Hey, Kawanami?"

"What, Minami?"

"Has Yume-chan called Irido-kun by his first name?"

"Huh? Well, yeah, they have the same last name, so..." *Wait a second.* Now that I actually thought about it, I'd only ever heard her refer to him as "that guy" or "my little brother." "Wait, are you saying that she just did?!"

"I need to go on a little trip to see Yume-chan!"

"You're not going anywhere! You don't even know where they are!"

"I don't care! I'm going!"

Approximate days until Akatsuki functioned like a normal human being: unknown.

I exhaled as I felt the sun drying the water off my body as I lay with my arms and legs outstretched. Akatsuki had challenged me to a race, saying that she wanted to blow off some steam. I was exhausted now. *Slow down! This is a public pool, dumbass!* Speaking of her, she was standing there as if she hadn't broken a sweat. The water glistened on her body as she fixed her bikini's bottom with her finger.

"Phew, I'm thirsty. Let's get something."

"Bring me something back?"

"What? You want me to go by myself? What're you even here for?"

"To be your portable sandbag, right?"

"Guy-repellent!"

"Oh yeah, I'm worried about guys hitting on you."

"Hm? Glad you understand."

"I'd be so sad if this beautiful pool was stained by the blood of the guys you killed for hitting on you."

"You should be worried about *me*!"

She gave me a light kick before asking me what I wanted to drink. I told her I wanted a Coke, and she walked off to find a vending machine or something. I shook my head and sat up.

The place didn't seem to have any creepy guys who would hit on girls who looked like middle schoolers. Even if there were any, I was sure that she could shake them off. She might even send them flying. If Irido-san or Higashira were here, I'd be worried...especially about Higashira. If she came to the pool, she'd definitely draw attention with her proportions.

I began looking at the couples around the pool in an attempt to recover.

"Hey, you by yourself?" I heard someone ask.

And we're off. There's the summer pick-up attempts... Wait, that's a girl's voice. I turned around and standing there were two older girls in sexy swimsuits. They were looking right at me. *Uh... Huh?*

"You're not here with friends? I'm surprised."

"We're by ourselves too. Kinda lonely."

They leaned over in a way that made it seem that they were trying to flaunt their low-hanging "fruits." One of them was fair-skinned and had black hair, while the other was tanned and had brown hair. Both of them had hourglass figures that were tastefully covered by their swimsuits. *Wait, is this...?* I gulped at the once-in-a-lifetime situation that'd just fallen in my lap.

"You're...talking to me?" I asked them.

"Yep! You!"

"Girls hitting on a guy. Fun, isn't it? Aha ha ha!"

This is a real thing?! I'd only ever heard of girls hitting on guys in stories. This was uncharted territory. As I desperately tried to think of the best way to deal with this, the two girls sat next to me, sealing off any escape.

"Whoa, now that I get a closer look, you got some muscle on ya."

"Very toned. Play any sports?"

Pleasant fragrances wafted towards me as they started feeling up my arms.

"N-No, I just work out on my own..."

"Wow! Looks like your hard work's paying off!"

"It's a shame that you worked so hard for this body and yet you're here all alone. Wanna hang with us?" the tanned girl practically whispered in my ear while pressing her chest against my upper arm. Then, at the same time, the other girl did the same with her even larger breasts. *Oh my god! They really want me! I'm in the situation of a lifetime! Pinch me—I'm dreaming!*

But all dreams had to come to an end, and my body was not allowing me to dream any longer. A chill ran up my spine, and I could

feel my stomach churning. Their aromas and interest in me encircled my body, opening up old wounds.

“You’re down, right? Let’s have some fun!”

“We’ll treat you. Let’s swap digits.”

Oh, crap... I’d sensed romantic feelings from girls a lot of times since developing my “allergy,” but this situation was the absolute worst. I couldn’t even get out a response. It’d gotten to the point that I was really cursing my appearance. If I had to endure this because of my looks, then I’d rather be plain and unattractive. I had to find a way to turn them down or else they’d become acquainted with my lunch.

“How ’bout we go down that waterslide together?”

“Oh, fun! Let’s go!”

“Whatcha doin’?” A small girl’s shadow fell over the two girls next to me. She was holding a bottle and a can of Coke. It was Akatsuki Minami, looking straight down at me, making the two girls glance awkwardly from side to side.

“Uh...”

“You his little sister?”

Akatsuki leered at them, and said, as if it were completely natural, “I’m his girlfriend. Something wrong?”

Silence. It took a while to process what she’d said, but the girls quickly let go of me and moved away.

“Oh, what? You’re not by yourself?”

“If you’d said you had a girlfriend, we would’ve left immediately. For real!”

Then they apologized, said they’d leave, and that Akatsuki had a hot boyfriend before making themselves scarce. As they left, I heard them say “Ah, that sucks!” and “He was seriously my type!”

We were left in an uncomfortable silence as we looked at each other. *At the very least, she saved me, right?* The chills and nausea began fading away. I felt like I could talk again, so I opened my mouth.

“Sorry. You really sav—”

“That was a compleeeete lie, though.”

“Huh?” *What does that mean?*

She sat down next to me. “I lied about being your girlfriend, and I’m not gonna act like one, okay? Chill out.” This came out so bluntly that all I could do was nod and accept my soda from her.

As I took the can from her, my lips curled into a smile. “Listen.”

“What?”

“You’re the only girl I’ll ever hang out with.”

“Heah?!” Akatsuki’s eyes darted around in confusion. “Huh? Huh?! Wh-Wha—What do you mean?”

“It’s simple. You’re the only girl I can physically hang out with. What other choice do I have?”

“O-Oh, I see...”

“I have no clue what’ll happen if someone confesses to me. I might die, seriously.” I pulled back the tab on the can, which made a hissing noise before I chugged the soda down. My chills and nausea felt like they washed away with each gulp.

Akatsuki hugged her knees and glanced at me. “Ew. You think you’re *that* popular?”

“Well, yeah. Didn’t you see what just happened?”

“You’re just an easy-to-target virgin.”

“I’m such a sinful man to even have my hooks in older women. Next year when I’m an upperclassman, I gotta be careful about the freshmen.”

“God, you’re so full of yourself!” Akatsuki twisted the cap off her drink and began gulping down her soda.

She never used to drink carbonated drinks. Her swimming, communication, and mental fortitude had all improved. I was honestly proud of the strides she’s made. She’d leave me in the dust someday.

“Don’t abandon me, chick-repellent.”

“Weren’t you the one having fun ogling their big tits?”

“I wasn’t ogling anything! Didn’t you see how hard I was trying not to throw up?!”

Despite how eventful the day was, we had a good time at the pool. We rode waves on inner tubes in the wave pool, had an underwater wrestling match, and...went on the waterslide together.

She may have had the same exact kind of body that she did when we practiced swimming, but there was a big difference between then and now.

We were at the top of the slide and Akatsuki was sitting in front of me in between my legs.

“Careful. You might get flung from the slide ’cause you’re so light.”

“I don’t need this right now!” Akatsuki put my hands around her stomach. “Hold on tight...okay?” she muttered.

“You got it.” Just as she asked, I gripped her thin waist so she wouldn’t fly into the sky on our way down. Fortunately, we reached the bottom without any incident. After all these years, we’d finally fulfilled the promise we made in elementary school.

Ah, if only it’d ended there. It would’ve made such a nice memory.

“H-Hey, look! O-Over there!”

“Hm? Oh, crap.”

My expression stiffened. It was getting late so we were heading to the showers before taking off. There were no lines, so we thought we

were lucky, but we saw someone approaching from the pool—a classmate of ours.

I knew them. Worst of all, they'd come in a group of other girls and guys. Had they seen us? We wouldn't be able to play things off like we had during the study camp if they caught us. We'd be dead in the water for sure.

"Crap, we need to hide!"

I'd said before that this wasn't anything to be embarrassed of, but that heavily depended on what we were doing and who was around. They were coming towards the showers for something, meaning they'd see us soon. *We need to hide, but where?!*

"Just get in there! This way!"

"Wha—?"

Akatsuki decisively pulled me while I was lost in my thoughts. I had no clue where she was taking me at first, but then I saw her open a door to a shower. She threw me inside before coming in too. She shut the door behind us and let out a small sigh of relief.

"That was close..."

"What do you mean? We're in an even worse situation now!" I hissed.

The shower we were in was about as cramped as a fitting room. We basically had to hug each other. Moving was pretty much out of the question.

"I-I didn't have a choice! This was the only thing I could think of!"

"We could've gone into separate showers!"

"Uh..."

"Dumbass!"

Suddenly, we heard laughter from outside, forcing us to stop whispering. I had my back to the wall across from the door while Akatsuki had her cheek pressed against my chest. Even if I quieted my breathing, my heart was beating hard and fast. Akatsuki would surely notice.

"The shower... Turn it on."

"R-Right."

It would be weird if the stall was occupied without any water running. I reached behind me and twisted the knob, releasing water from the showerhead. The sound from it was loud enough that I could cover up my heartbeat.

Our dry bodies were once again wet by water. Akatsuki's ponytail clung to her neck. The fingers I had around her waist began to stick to her skin. I was reminded of when I'd embrace her in the past. She'd been so small and frail, and I'd felt like I had to protect her. But when I gripped her tightly, I could feel how strong she was. I could feel her accepting me.

“Hey, so...who’re you after?”

“Huh? No one.”

We froze, hearing these voices right outside. I accidentally tensed up, pulling her wet body closer to mine until we touched.

“Ah—” Akatsuki let out a soft noise.

“Aw, don’t play me like that. You’re the one who said he wants to get a girlfriend over the summer.”

“Yeah, I did, but no need to rush.”

“This guy’s chickening out.”

Even if Akatsuki had made that noise, it’d been drowned out by the shower. Still, I was worried, so I pulled her head against my chest. Naturally, she was surprised and began to flail around, but she calmed down and wrapped her arms around my back.

My left leg slid in between her legs, and it was like she was sitting on my thighs. Though I could easily feel that she was lacking a certain part that differentiated her from being a guy, I chased any thoughts about that out of my mind. There was no way in hell that I was about to let Akatsuki notice the part of me that made me a guy.

Get in the shower already so we can leave! Just as I was trying to will them to do as I wanted, they changed topics.

“Oh, right, so you know how in those dirty manga, couples do all sorts of things in the shower.”

Akatsuki and I both jumped a little. *We’re not doing anything in here! Wrong time, wrong place!*

“Dumbass, there’s someone in there!”

“Sorry about our friend. He’s an idiot!”

Akatsuki fidgeted around in my arms. She didn’t want to look at me. If she did...I could only imagine what’d happen. I didn’t have any opportunity to respond to them. They laughed and then entered the showers.

We waited a little to make sure that they weren’t coming out, and then I loosened my grip on her. Akatsuki immediately pushed against me, letting go. *Of course.* No matter how sudden of a situation it was, the fact remained that I had embraced her. If we were dating, maybe it’d be okay, but we’d broken up. Plus, I had been the one that dumped her.

Akatsuki backed against the door and looked down as the hot water fell on us. I wanted to apologize, but before I could, her mouth began moving.

“S-Sorry...” She’d covered her mouth with her ponytail, meaning I couldn’t make out her expression. “I won’t be able to hold myself back anymore...” she said in a low voice before silently opening the door and leaving me there.

The sound of the water spewing out of the showerhead filled my

ears. *Hold herself back? From what?*

“Ugh...” I looked at the ceiling and began gargling with the water. *That’s my line, you goddamn idiot!*



It went without saying that the bus ride home wasn’t pleasant; it was awkward as hell. We didn’t even sit next to each other. We took seats so one of us was sitting in front of the other. We didn’t speak—all we did was listen to the sounds of people around us.

I’d thought that at this rate, we’d stay in this weird funk even after we parted for the day. But there’s a strange psychological phenomenon that happens to humans.

As soon as we sat down after transferring trains, Akatsuki began nodding off. I’d noticed her rubbing her eyes earlier, but it looked like she’d finally reached her limit. It only made sense after how hard she’d been swimming. At first, my plan was to sit across from her, but I changed my mind and sat next to her instead.

“Here. Use my shoulder.”

Akatsuki didn’t so much as look at me. “Mm... Thanks, Ko-kun...” she said in a sleepy voice before leaning her head on me.

The next moment, my ear was filled with the sound of her sleeping. If she hadn’t forced me to come with her to the pool, I might’ve had a relatively peaceful day lazing around at home. But, well... I couldn’t deny that spending the day with this handful of a childhood friend was a hell of a lot more fun. *In the end, I guess I can’t abandon her either.*

The Ex-Couple Visits Family (3)

First Love's Scar

Falling in love for the first time in middle school is apparently late by most people's standards. It's normal to hear about someone's first love being their kindergarten teacher, a classmate in elementary school, or someone who becomes family before they know it.

Getting to middle school without a crush or two is super rare, and even rarer is someone actually going out with their first love. It gets even more obscure with people who went as long as high school without even knowing what love was. Those people are extreme cases, though.

It's normal to have a crush before adolescence. Therefore, it only made sense that Mizuto Irido had fallen in love with someone before he'd met me. I knew how petty I was being. He had no obligation, morally or logically, to cater to me. Whomever he fell in love with first had nothing to do with me.

But even so... I had always dreamt that I was his first love and he was mine during our honeymoon period. I'd wanted to believe that even though we'd broken up, he'd always remember me as his first love. I didn't want to relinquish that spot to anyone.

I knew how cringey this was. I was annoying, clingy, weak, and a total pain in the ass. I couldn't believe that there was a guy out there who'd fallen for me.

"Ugh..." I groaned as I hid behind the thin sliding door. I trembled while lamenting how pathetic I was.

On the other side of the door, sitting in the back of the dim, dusty study was my little stepbrother and ex, Mizuto Irido, surrounded by a mountain of books that looked like they could bury him at any second.

The situation wasn't all that complicated. Mineaki-ojisan had asked me to call Mizuto because he needed a hand. All I had to do was tell Mizuto that his dad wanted his help. That's it. Even so, I'd been cowering here for longer than I'd like to admit. Peeking inside, I saw that he had his nose burrowed deep in a book and hadn't noticed me whatsoever.

I both wished that he would and wouldn't notice me already. My head was a mess. My poor communication skills were once again

rearing their ugly heads. Back in middle school, it took me tens of minutes of mental preparation before I could talk to anyone—and I could never work up the courage to go into the staff room. I was sure that I'd overcome this after going through the very efficient training that was a relationship.

But I was still a shy girl at my core. Try as I may, I couldn't change completely. That being said, I was proud of the fact that I'd been able to expand my communication abilities. But...where were they now?

I knew the reason I was acting like this. As much as I didn't want to admit it, what he'd said yesterday as we were walking back had hit me harder than I'd expected. *"Someone who laughed a lot,"* he'd said nostalgically. I couldn't help but wonder who he was thinking of when he said that. Not that I needed to ask. I already had a good idea from when I first met her. His first love was—

"Hm? Whatcha doin', Yume-chan?"

I jumped a little and turned around. Standing there was Madoka-san, curiously looking at me through her red-framed glasses. She really was beautiful, especially in her pure white dress... *It's amazing that even at twenty, an outfit like this suits her perfectly. No, that's not what I need to think about right now! I need an excuse for why I'm creeping on him.*

"Oh, uh, well... I just, uh... I spaced out." That was the best excuse I could come up with. It seemed that my poor social skills had begun to affect my quick wit. I could feel my brain rotting.

"You okay? You gotta be careful. There's a lot of rooms without AC units in 'em," she said, fanning herself with her hand. There were droplets of sweat around her neck. *That's kinda sexy...*

"Hm... Oh, good." Madoka-san moved past me, poked her head into the room, and effortlessly called out to Mizuto. "Mizuto-kun, your dad's callin' for ya." She managed what I'd anguished over for ten minutes in a matter of seconds.

"Mm." Mizuto let out a short, one-syllable response before shutting his book and looking up. "Hm?" He then noticed me next to her.

"How long have you been there?"

"I-It doesn't matter." I felt so embarrassed that I responded defensively on reflex.

Mizuto must have thought that it was just me being me. He didn't seem surprised in the slightest. "Did you need something?" he asked.

I did need something, but...now I don't. "N-No!" I said before quickly walking away. No, I *ran* away—from both Mizuto and Madoka-san.

Nothing had changed between us. Mizuto and I were still

stepsiblings who had once dated. But he had a past I didn't know about. That should've been so obvious, but I'd only realized it just now. What did that matter though? Even if Mizuto used to have a thing for Madoka-san—if he used to have a thing for anyone else—it had absolutely nothing to do with me.

“Oh.”

“Ah...” Chikuma's eyes widened behind his long bangs.

After fleeing the study, I'd wandered around the house and found myself in a spacious Japanese-style room. Hiding in the corner was Chikuma-kun, who'd been playing on his portable game console.

Sitting at the table not too far from him were Chikuma-kun's dad and some other older relatives, all engaged in conversation. Chikuma-kun was left by himself, but it wasn't like he could participate in their discussion. He was most likely keeping his distance because of that. Chikuma-kun was shy, but he wasn't a loner by choice like Mizuto, nor was he a free spirit like Higashira-san. I felt a sort of kinship with him and sat near him.

“Are you okay? The AC's not too strong?”

“I-I'm okay...” he practically whispered before hiding his face behind his game console.

Oh, my. I've made him nervous. He had a tendency to go red and look away from me whenever I talked to him. *Hm... Maybe I should try speaking to him from a closer distance in order to make him feel more comfortable.* This knowledge came from a book that I'd once read. With that in mind, I sat next to him. He jumped a little, but fortunately didn't try to move away from me. *Yay!*

“Is your hobby playing video games?” I asked.

“Not really...”

“I like reading books in my free time. Are there any books you like reading?”

“Do strategy guides count?”

“What are those?”

“They tell you how to beat games and have all sorts of data...”

“Are they fun to read?”

“Kinda...”

“I see...”

The conversation ended. *What do I do now? What can I talk about with an elementary schooler?* We were different ages and genders, so nothing immediately came to mind. Though I'd improved my conversation skills, I wasn't like a barber who could effortlessly go from topic to topic. *I need something we both can talk about... Something we both have in common.*

“Uh... Any girls you like?”

I couldn't believe that I'd just asked the kind of question a relative you hadn't seen in a while would. The idea was to stick with a simple question, but still...I didn't really see him being interested enough to respond.

"Huh?!" he practically yelped. His face tore away from his game. "L-Like...?"

"Hm? Yeah. Any girls you like? At school, maybe?"

"S-School..." His tone of voice obviously lowered as did his gaze. "Nobody at school..." he said, his eyes back on his game.

"Oh, I see. Well, are there any cute girls?"

"I... I don't know. I don't remember what they look like..."

"Oh, I totally get you. When you're shy, you don't really look at people's faces."

Chikuma-kun nodded excitedly in agreement. *Here it is! The thing we have in common!*

"When you forget your chopsticks, it's hard to go up to the teacher and ask to borrow them."

He nodded.

"When you're out on a school hike, you end up focusing on the scenery, because it's too hard to talk to others."

He nodded.

"And when you have to pair up in gym class, you already know that you don't have a partner, so you have to look for people left over, but you can never bring yourself to ask them if they want to pair up, so you wait for them to ask you instead..."

He vigorously nodded. It was obvious he really vibed with what I was saying. If his reaction wasn't enough, the glint in his eye made it clear. He'd found someone who understood him. Madoka-san's appearance may have made it seem like she was one of us, but in reality, she was a bona fide socialite. She could never understand what it was like for us.

"School can be tough when you're shy..."

"Yeah..."

"If you ever need any advice, let me know. Do you have a phone?"

Chikuma-kun frantically dug around his pockets and pulled out a brand-new phone. *Wow, what a modern kid.*

"You probably don't know how to add people on LINE. Here, let me show you."

Chikuma-kun happily nodded and gave me his phone. I probably didn't need to talk about the loner experience, but it looked like it had cheered him up. *I used to be just like him.* When we started going out, Mizuto was able to guess a lot about what I was thinking without me saying anything.

This was probably the first time that I'd approached someone myself. My past self never would've thought that I'd be able to do this, nor that it would be with a boy. Even when I had confessed to Mizuto, I'd...

"And there you go. All done. You know what to do now?" I gave Chikuma-kun his phone back while trying to brush off all the thoughts in my head.

Chikuma-kun held the phone against his chest. "C-Can I... Is it okay for me to message you?" he asked in a soft but very clear voice.

"Can you?" I giggled.

"Uh..."

"Aha ha ha. I'm bad at messaging people first too."

Chikuma-kun shrank his shoulders. *Ah, he's so cute. If only a certain unsociable guy could be more like him.*

"Sorry to interrupt your pleasant chat," someone interrupted in a thorny voice, casting a shadow on us. I looked up, and Mizuto was looking down at me with cold eyes. "You two sure have gotten close."

"What? Is there a problem with that?" I asked, tensing up, and reflexively copying his thorny tone.

"Nope. Just remarking on how your attitude sure is different with kids."

"Huh? No it's not."

"Whatever. If you don't see it, then that's fine."

What? What's his problem? If you've got something to say, then spit it out! He was always like this—acting like he knew everything.

"So, what do you want? Here to annoy me?"

"I don't *want* anything, per se..." He trailed off before snorting and continuing. "Madoka-san asked me to check on things. That's it."

Something snapped inside of me from hearing that. "I bet you'd jump off a cliff if Madoka-san asked you to."

"Huh?"

You never do what I ask. You just get pissed at me! He had never once obediently done as I asked him. So why... Why was he so obedient when it came to Madoka-san?

"If you don't need anything, then move along." I did my best to hold back from sounding angry. "Why don't you spend time with your beloved Madoka-san instead of bothering yourself with me?"

He stared at me for a little before shortly exhaling. It was almost as if he was saying he was done with me.

"Bye." He turned around and left.

All I could do was stare at my knees. Then I noticed the sound of soft breathing and remembered Chikuma-kun next to me. He seemed a little shaken as he cautiously looked up at me.

"O-Oh, s-sorry, I didn't mean to scare you." I quickly smiled. *God,*

what am I doing in front of a kid? “We weren’t fighting or anything. This is just how we always are. Seriously.” Spouting this excuse kind of calmed me down. *Right. This is how we always are.* “So don’t tell your mom or dad, okay? It’ll be our little secret.” I put my index finger to my mouth.

Chikuma-kun nodded. For some reason, after that, Chikuma-kun would avert his gaze whenever we made eye contact, and he’d cover his ears with his hands.

“Greetings, Yume-san.” Hearing Higashira-san’s voice over the phone filled me with relief.

“Sorry for calling out of the blue. Is now okay for you, Higashira-san?”

“Yes... Mm! I’m fine... Mmf!”

“Are you, uh, sure?”

She was making very strange sounds and it was as if her voice was both close and far from the phone.

“Yes, I’m fine... Phew. I’m simply working out.”

“Working out? I never thought I’d hear those words come out of your mouth.”

“My mother said, ‘Even though you’re on vacation, it’s no excuse for you to slack off. If you don’t put in work, your chest’s going to sag. Your rack is the only thing you have going for you, so you better do something about it. If you don’t...no dinner for you.’”

“I’ve been wondering, but...your mom’s kind of intense, isn’t she?”

I couldn’t imagine that there was a parent out there who would really tell their daughter that her breasts were the only thing going for her. She didn’t sound real.

Higashira-san exhaled. “I was able to do five whole push-ups! I’m done for the day!”

“Even I can do more than that...”

She ignored my comment and moved on. “So, what would you like to speak to me about, Yume-san?”

I looked up at the summer night sky from the veranda, taking my time to carefully pick my words.

“Well, I wanted to check in to see how you’re doing after the whole swimsuit incident yesterday.”

“I do not wish to remember that.”

“You’re usually so bold in front of him. I’m surprised that this bothers you so much.”

“Of course it does! It’s embarrassing! My name was written on it in large letters! It makes me seem very childish!”

“Wait, *that’s* your issue with this?”

“Huh? What else is there to be bothered by?”

Are you serious right now? She wasn't worried about her breasts spilling out? Or how the swimsuit was digging into her skin, especially around her nether regions?

"I bet you wouldn't care if he saw you naked. Although, I guess you were embarrassed when he saw your panties."

"Uh, no. I would absolutely be embarrassed if he saw me naked."

"Oh, really?"

"I've never even entered the hot springs with others during school field trips."

"You're embarrassed about being naked around girls too, huh?"

"Yes, quite."

So she's just embarrassed in general. It has nothing to do with Mizuto or him being a guy.

"If it was a bath with *you*, though," she continued. "I might consider it... You're very slender, but also blessed in certain areas. You have the figure of a model... Geh heh heh."

"Um, you're grossing me out a little, Higashira-san."

"Oh, my apologies."

"I'm really not that attractive..." I could feel a darkness creeping into my heart. "I'm only thin because I don't have any muscles. I didn't work for my chest or anything either."

"Minami-san would certainly murder you if she heard that."

"Right." *I need to be more careful.*

I'd driven Mizuto away and left Chikuma-kun by himself. I was completely alone. Why had I decided to call Higashira-san? Part of me thought she'd understand. Someone who was in love with Mizuto would be able to sympathize with my pathetic, unresolved feelings.

"So, I'm currently at the family home of the Iridos out here in the countryside..."

"Yes, I'm aware. Have you witnessed any strange customs? Or perhaps you've heard an ominous counting song from ancient times?"

"Sorry to disappoint, but no." *To be honest, I'd hoped I'd encounter something like that.* "All the family members from his dad's side are here though."

"Oh, I see."

"Among them...there's a beautiful college girl."

"Oh?" *She's not reacting the way I thought she would.* She was neither surprised nor worried. "Could she possibly be Mizuto-kun's first love?"

"Yes... Possibly."

"Oh!"

"Okay, spill the beans. Why do you keep reacting like that?"

"I'm certain that Mizuto-kun was adorable as a child. I, for one, love a good May-December romance."

“A what?” *As usual, I have no clue what she’s talking about.*

“I’m already full of bliss from simply imagining a smaller Mizuto-kun! Thinking about a beautiful older lady taking care of that incredibly cute Mizuto-kun is nothing short of hot! It’s incredibly arousing!”

This clears absolutely nothing up. What is she so excited about?

“You’re not shocked or anything? We’re talking about someone that Mizuto used to like,” I said.

“Why should I be? The mere image of that unsociable Mizuto being so close to an older girl from his family makes my heart skip a beat!”

“It...does?”

Hm... This isn’t as simple a problem as our philosophies on love being different. Our values aren’t even the slightest bit similar.

“Yume-san.” Higashira-san sounded dispassionate as she broke me out of my thoughts. “What kind of reaction were you hoping for?”

“Huh?” My heart trembled as if it’d been pierced.

“Pardon my question, but I’ve had the feeling that you’ve been fishing for something but didn’t get it. I’m so sorry if it’s all in my head!”

I didn’t get what I was fishing for? Yeah... I wanted someone to share my wound with and agonize over it with me. I wanted to hurt her. I wanted to make her sad. I wanted her to share my feelings. I wanted her sympathy. I’m so shallow...

“I’m sorry. I didn’t intend to... I just wanted to talk with you.”

“Oh, I see. That’s good—”

“Isana! You better not be slacking on your workout!”

“Eek!”

I suddenly heard another voice from her side of the phone, eliciting a yelp from Higashira-san. She must’ve really been freaked out. I heard stomping in the background.

“A-Are you okay?”

“My mother’s coming to check on me! Apologies, Yume-san! I must attend to my job of maintaining my breasts!”

“Oh? O-Okay. Good luck?”

“Farewell!”

And that’s how the call ended. *Maybe Higashira-san gets her weirdness from her mom?*

“Your phone call over?”

“Eek!” I let out a shriek just like Higashira-san had as an unexpected voice rang out from above me. Looking up, I saw Madoka-san’s bespectacled face, wearing a devilish expression.

“That was a really cute shriek.”

“D-Do you need something, Madoka-san?”

Truth be told, she was probably the last person I wanted to talk to right now.

“You remember how there’s a festival tomorrow?” she asked.

“Uh, yes...”

From what I’d heard there was a large summer festival being held at the station. It was right before we were going back home. It’d be the last thing we did here. As things were right now, I wasn’t really looking forward to it.

“Natsume-obaachan said she’s gonna lend you a yukata for tomorrow,” said Madoka-san.

“Is that so?”

“Yep! Let’s go pick out our yukatas. Just you and me.”

“Okay.” *Hm?* I’d answered reflexively, but...just us? Now? *Just* the two of us?!

“Okay! Let’s go!”

Madoka-san grabbed me by hand and pulled me up before I could even wrap my head around the huge mistake I’d made.

“I’ve got quite the selection! Pick out and try on whatever you’d like!” Natsume-san said, shutting the door behind her.

“Thanks!” Madoka-san called out before placing her hands on her hips. “All righty.”

In front of us was a large selection of neatly folded yukatas. I’d usually be so excited by their beauty, but I didn’t really have the capacity for that right now.

“Anything catch your eye, Yume-chan? You’re so slender *and* you have long hair, so I bet you really rock the traditional Japanese look.”

“I...” This didn’t help my already sour mood, which was growing worse by the minute. The last time I’d worn a yukata was a whole year ago.

Mizuto and I had been in the middle of a fight, so we stopped contacting each other. Consequently, we didn’t make any plans the entire summer break. Even so, I’d desperately hoped that he’d be at the summer festival, even if we hadn’t made any plans. The dark blue yukata I’d worn then was still fresh in my memory.

“Yume-chan?”

“Wha—” I looked up and saw Madoka-san right before my eyes.

“Don’t like festivals?” she asked, worried. This only made me feel worse.

Madoka-san wasn’t at fault. Neither was Mizuto. I was the only one to blame. It was my fault that I was so weak.

“I just have some bad memories,” I said.

“Aw. Well, festivals tend to cause more problems than not. It’s easy to get lost, trip, skin your knees, or get hurt from the straps of

your sandals—they're filled with all sorts of danger." She snickered. "I have a lot of baggage from when I went with my boyfriend."

"Huh?"

She'd said it so naturally that it took my mind a moment to catch up. *What did she say? Huh?!*

"Your b-boyfriend?"

"Hm? Yeah, my boyfriend."

"You...have a boyfriend?"

"Yep. Huh? Do I look like a single girl?" she asked, smiling.

Madoka-san was beautiful, cheery, and charming. Of course she had a boyfriend. I'd never even considered it. Maybe it was because I'd only really seen her as my cousin. Or maybe...

"H-How long have you two been dating?"

"Hm... We've technically been dating since we started college, so maybe a year and a half? I was with another guy in high school."

"A different boyfriend?!"

"Yep! But he turned out to really not be my type, so I broke up with him," she said between giggles.

She wore stylish red-framed glasses and looked right at home in a library. Yet *she* was the one being choosy?! Her looks were seriously deceiving! If she wasn't my cousin, I doubt I'd ever try to get involved with her.

"What're you getting so surprised about? I'm honestly on the less insane side of the spectrum. My friends are a lot worse. Their body count goes into the double digits. Me? Two people. See? Not bad, right?"

"So your boyfriend now is your third?"

"Well, technically, he's my first boyfriend."

"Your *third* boyfriend is your *first* boyfriend?!"

"Yeah, we got back together. We broke up once and got back together in college."

Hearing this made me freeze. They got back together?

"Why did you get back together?" My throat felt really dry, but I was still able to squeeze these words out. "If you broke up, wasn't that because you hated each other?"

"Yeah. I never ever thought that we'd get back together, but..."

Madoka-san chuckled again, like she was laughing at herself. "When we met up again, I just decided to roll with it. I might've been pissed at him before, but I found that I didn't care anymore."

"You didn't care anymore?"

"He was a slob, completely unreliable—a total loser. That part of him really ticked me off, so I dumped him. But when you get into college, it's like all of your relationships get reset. You get to start fresh. We met during that blank-slate period. We naturally gravitated

to each other, and then..." Madoka-san pulled out a bright blue yukata. "I began thinking that whether he was a slob, an unreliable guy, or a loser—I'd make up for all of his flaws. If anything, his flaws became more endearing to me."

"Um, sorry to be rude, but..."

"Hm?"

"Are you drawn to flawed people?"

"You think so too?" *That's all I can think after hearing everything.*

"My friends tell me that all the time. My second boyfriend had good grades and was good at sports. He was perfect. He was so perfect, in fact, that it pissed me off. Even when I dumped him, he was chill about it. God, that made me so mad! It was like he had no attachment to me or anything. When I dumped my first boyfriend, though, he bawled 'cuz he was so attached to me."

I'd thought of Madoka-san as a flawless person, but she was twisted in her own way, which gave me a sense of relief.

"Well, anyway, it's impossible for humans to love everything about their partners," Madoka-san said, holding the yukata to her body. "No matter how much you like someone, there're at least one or two parts of them that won't sit well with you. Couples are driven apart by those differences. But if you get past them, you end up being much more openhearted. You'll still hate the same parts about them, but you're more accepting of them."

"Accepting of them..." I parroted.

"Yep! That's me right now. My boyfriend asked me to borrow money for a mobile game recently, and I gave him a kick to his ass." She laughed.

There's always at least one or two parts of someone you won't like. Those parts are what make people break up. I felt Madoka-san's words deeply inside me. That being said, I was slightly worried for her future.

"So yeah, Yume-chan." Madoka-san brought the yukata she was holding in front of me and smiled. "I dunno what happened between you and Mizuto-kun, but you shouldn't let the small things bother you. There are so many unremarkable people and even more people to hate. If you find someone who you hate just as much as you love, then it's all good!"

Thinking about it, it was so simple. The people you date are living, breathing human beings. They aren't characters built around your ideals and delusions. If they're the lonesome type, it's only natural that they'd get jealous if you started being nice to others.

If they had lived their life completely alone until you tried to rescue them, then of course they'd fall for you. We weren't talking about someone who was out of reach like an idol. We were talking

about a person in the same place, same situation—a human being. Getting jealous or getting mad about their first love was futile. I knew that. I'd known it all along.

"There's nothing going on between me and Mizuto." Looking down, I saw the beautiful yukata. It felt too pure for me. "I'm just getting down on myself for my own pettiness."

I couldn't be as happy-go-lucky as Madoka-san, but if I could, then maybe I wouldn't have to live life being shocked by every little thing. I didn't have the right, nor was it at all logical. I was so annoyingly negative and incorrigible when it came to pettiness. Everything—*everything* was my fault.

"Hm?" Madoka-san took the yukata off my shoulders and tilted her head. "Yume-chan, it's kinda dusty in here, isn't it?"

"Huh?" I looked up at her.

She'd changed the topic so quickly.

"Let's hit the bath together after picking out a yukata." She shot me another devilish grin.

Madoka-san had urged me to enter the bath first. I took the opportunity to pour some of the hot bathwater on myself before submerging myself in it. I idly gazed at the ceiling as condensation dripped off of it, and suddenly, I realized that my brain had stopped functioning. *Uh, what exactly am I doing again?*

I glanced over at the changing room. The door was shut, but I could see Madoka-san's silhouette tying up her hair through the frosted glass. She'd already gotten undressed, leaving almost nothing to imagine about her beautiful figure.

I wrapped my arms around my knees. She'd said that she wanted to have a fun girl-to-girl chat with me, but...this was my first time taking a bath with anyone other than my mom since my middle school field trip. Actually, this may have been the first time that I'd ever had a one-on-one bath with *anyone*. *Why am I so nervous? She isn't Akatsuki-san! There's nothing to be worried about.*

"Sorry 'bout the wait!"

The door rattled as it slid open. She stood in the doorway, with a hand on her hip as if she was proudly trying to show off her naked body.

I already knew how good of a body she had from when I saw her in her bikini, but I was once again blown away by how beautiful a waist she had, how well shaped her butt was, and how her legs were the perfect thickness.

Perhaps even more impressive were her self-proclaimed F-cup breasts, which retained their perfect shape even without a bra, bikini, or any sort of support whatsoever. It was as if they ignored gravity

and the very laws of physics themselves.

Her breasts slightly bounced with each step she took. “Whaddya think?” Madoka-san asked proudly.

“You’re beautiful...” I answered honestly.

“Thanks! You too! I’m so jealous of how slender you are. Every girl wants to look the way you do.”

“Th-That’s not...” I shrank at her compliment. Hearing *her* of all people say that was too much to handle.

Madoka-san scooped and poured some of the bathwater on herself before gesturing for me to make room for her. As she stepped over the edge of the bathtub to get in, my eyes were inadvertently drawn to her pelvic area—or rather, what was missing from it. Was this grooming a result of having someone to show it to?

“Phew...” Madoka-san let out a satisfied sigh as she seated herself across from me. With two people in the bath, the water overflowed and poured down the drain outside the bath.

This bath was on the bigger side, but having two people in it was still a bit cramped. Even with my legs pulled against my chest, we were still touching. It kinda made my heart race.

“Whew, I feel so free!” Madoka-san said, her peach-shaped breasts floating atop the water.

With breasts that big, I bet baths are her only freedom from back strain. It must’ve been a great reprieve from the harshness of gravity.

“Heh. Are ya *that* interested in ’em?” Madoka-san snickered, noticing my gaze. She grabbed her breasts and lifted them up. “Wanna cop a feel?”

“Huh? U-Uh...”

“It’s on the house!”

“O-Okay...” It felt kind of weird to turn her down with the way she was insisting, so I nervously stretched my hands out towards her chest.

My fingers sank, and as I pulled them back, it felt as if her skin was wrapping around me, trying to suck me back in. *Oh! So this is what it’s like to grope someone!* I tried grabbing them from all different angles.

“Mm,” Madoka-san moaned.

“S-Sorry!” I freaked out and quickly pulled back.

“Just kidding!” she snickered.

This isn’t good for my heart. I was severely lacking in the mutual groping department. I may have even had less experience than Mizuto in that regard, what with Higashira-san in the mix and all.

Madoka-san leisurely rested her arms on the edge of the bathtub and lay her head in her hands. “So. Let’s have our little heart-to-heart before the heat makes us pass out,” she declared. “We can be brutally

honest with each other. There's nothing left to hide now that we're both naked."

"I'm not hiding anything..."

"Of course you are! How do you feel about Mizuto-kun? You like him? Hate him?"

It was a simple question, but still, I took my time to figure out how to answer. I *used* to like him and I *used* to hate him, but I didn't know how I felt about him now.

"So, I've been giving it some thought," Madoka-san continued, not waiting for my response.

"About what?"

"About what I'd do if I were in your shoes." A drop of water fell from the ceiling into the bathtub, causing the water to ripple. "If I was a high schooler, and a boy the same age as I started living with me, I can't even imagine how stressful that'd be. I'd have to watch out for so many things, and I doubt I'd be able to *not* notice him...you know? Your folks seem to be pretty okay with the situation, though, so that's good. I bet that's thanks to all the effort you and Mizuto-kun have put into reassuring them."

Our relationship was not nearly as neat and tidy as Madoka-san was imagining. There were so many twists and turns, but...I doubted that our familial relationship would be the way it was now if we hadn't gone through so much. It had actually hit me fairly recently that thanks to us knowing each other prior to our parents' marriage, we were able to keep things peaceful at home.

"What would you have done if you were living with a guy the same age as you?" I asked.

"It'd depend on the guy, but if it were Mizuto-kun, I'd probably have fallen in love with him."

"Huh...?" I blinked, dumbfounded by how plain and simple her response was. "Wh-What about Mizuto would make that happen?"

"Honestly? His looks."

"His looks?"

Madoka-san snickered at my bewilderment. "He's a cutie! If we were classmates, I doubt I'd notice, but living with someone makes you notice things that you normally wouldn't, right? Plus, the fact that you're able to live with him stress-free means that you don't have any problem with his personality, right? If you're good with him as a person *and* his looks, then there's no way you won't think about him like that. At that point, even his plainness starts to become attractive. You'll start getting all giddy about how only you know how amazing he really is— Oh, by 'you' I mean in a general sense. No girl could resist."

I had no words. Everything she'd said hit home. I got a feeling

that even Higashira-san would fall silent after hearing this.

"I think the same goes for Mizuto-kun, though. Sharing a house with a beautiful girl like you's enough to make him lose his mind."

"Lose his mind...?"

"You'll find out when you're older." She chuckled.

I felt my face burning. I plunged it into the water, blowing bubbles as I tried to calm myself down. These last four months, I'd had so many close calls, but the same went for him, no matter how cold-blooded he might act. *Right? I mean, he does have those porn books.* We still hadn't gotten used to being under the same roof back then. We hadn't met Higashira-san yet either.

"I'm sure that he'd have been perfectly fine without me around..." I spoke truthfully, taking my mouth out of the water. "There's a girl he's much closer to."

"Oh, Higashira-chan? I've heard about her! She's his ex, right? She's been over a lot since summer break started, right? I'm surprised."

"She's not an ex. That's a misunderstanding on our parents' part."

"Really?"

"They're just friends. She confessed to him, but he turned her down."

"Ah, I see. They're just friends now? So that's the kinda girl she is, huh?"

"What kind of girl is that?"

"They're rare, but they're the type that straddle the line between 'friend' and 'girlfriend.' She's the type that girls hate—a love rival. It's like, get out of the way already if you've been rejected."

"I don't hate her. Besides, it's not her fault."

"And that's what makes it suck all the more. Wait, did you just admit to her being your love rival?"

"N-No, I didn't."

"You're so stubborn." She smiled teasingly. "She shoulda just stayed a friend at that point. I bet someone egged her on to confess." This made me jump a little. "Hm?"

"I'm...that someone."

"And the plot thickens." Madoka-san folded her arms under her breasts, pushing them up. "I'm not sure how I feel about you aggressively pursuing the same guy you were trying to push your friend to date."

"I'm not going to pursue him, though."

"But you feel bad whenever you see her clinging to him, don't you?"

I fell silent.

"You do, don'tcha?"

“N-No! B-But...” I still had unresolved feelings. The possessiveness that I’d had when we were dating hadn’t faded yet. “Maybe things wouldn’t be so muddled if they *had* actually dated...”

“All I hear is you trying to run away, Yume-chan,” Madoka-san chided while resting her head in her hands again.

“Huh?”

“You’re avoiding the issue of your feelings for him. Just because Mizuto-kun has other girls that he gets along with, you convince yourself that you don’t need to try and pursue a relationship.”

Me? I feel like I don’t need to try and pursue a relationship...with him?

“I’m just takin’ a shot in the dark, so take what I’m about to say with a grain of salt, okay? The most important person to you is your mom, right?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, your opinion of yourself is the pits. Because of that, you hold yourself back from going for things you want. All you think about is keeping your parents together, and that’s precisely why you *think* you can’t date Mizuto-kun. I completely get it. In a society where dating coworkers is already frowned upon in some companies, dating someone in the same household as you is basically unthinkable... Not that I’ve ever had a non-blood-related sibling,” Madoka-san noted. “But even so, you’re just fooling yourself. The clock’s ticking. How much longer can you keep it up?”

“Huh?”

“It’s hard enough to realize your feelings as it is, but it’s even harder when they’re for a family member. Regardless, that time will come, and when it does, you won’t have any more excuses at your disposal. You’ll have to decide things between yourselves.” It was as if she was stating an indisputable fact.

“What ‘time’ are you talking about? What happens then?”

“Hm... You’ll just have to wait and find out.” She giggled. “Oh man, I’ve always wanted to say something vague and mysterious like that.”

I kept thinking about what she’d said. I couldn’t even begin to imagine what she was talking about. Still, though, she must’ve had some kind of basis for saying all of this. I simply hadn’t noticed yet, but it was clear for a third party like her to see.

“It’s like summer homework. You should get it out of the way before it’s too late and you’re scrambling to get it done.” Madoka-san began stretching. “You should at least sort out your feelings before that time comes. Forget about family, friends, and other people for a bit and think things through.”

“But...how am I supposed to figure things out?”

“It’s easy. Does he make your heart race? Do you find yourself thinking you wanna kiss him? If it’s a yes to both of these questions, then you like him.”

“How’s that different from lust?” I knew that I was saying this because I was stubborn. It was like I was still trying to protect something, so I was hiding behind these words. “‘Love’ is just something passed down by our ancestors—a survival instinct. Your heart racing from feelings of romance and feelings of lust aren’t too different, are they?”

“Oh, *this* annoying argument, huh? Well, for starters, love might be a survival instinct passed down from our ancestors, but what about same-sex relationships? Do you think that survival plays any part in them loving each other?”

“Well, no...”

“Then we have the age-old question about what’s different between love and lust. I have an answer, though, wanna hear it?” She lay her head against her arm that was positioned on the edge of the bathtub. Then, in a soft, teasing voice, she continued. “When I see my boyfriend’s face right after we have sex, I think about how much I like him.”

“S-Sex?!” I suddenly remembered back to the time that our plan to go all the way failed and the time that he pushed me down when our parents weren’t home. I felt my body getting so hot that I could barely feel the warmth from the bath anymore.

“Aha ha ha! Sorry, was that too much for you?” Madoka-san stood up, water droplets dripping off of her bountiful mounds like rain. “I’m not telling you to figure things out right now. You should take your time, but you shouldn’t avoid him anymore.”

“B-But...” *If only it were that easy.*

Madoka-san snickered again. At this point it sounded like the seventh trumpet, signaling the end of the world.

“Don’t worry. Leave it to me!” she declared.

“Kay, wait here a sec.” Madoka-san shut the sliding door behind her.

After our bath, Madoka-san had dragged me to a dreary room. The only things in this room were drawers and empty bookcases. Apparently, nobody used this room, but at the very least, the tatami mats were clean, so somebody had to have been cleaning it.

It was amazing that there were still unused rooms even with all these family members staying over. There was an old, incandescent bulb in the middle of the ceiling, but it wasn’t on. There was no chain to pull, so I searched around the room for a switch or something while rubbing my arms for warmth.

Even though it was summer, the nights were chilly, so I was wearing a cardigan as per Madoka-san's instructions to "bundle up." It wasn't like I was going to get unbearably cold all that quickly, so I didn't know why I needed to do that. Did she need me to wait here for a while? My guess was that she wanted to mediate things between me and Mizuto.

Oh, there it is. I finally found the switch and flicked it on. I'd expected the light to turn on, but there was absolutely no sign that it was going to. Was the only light that this room got from the moonlight shining through the sliding door?

"Aaand we're here!"

The moonlight showed the shadows of two people. Madoka-san and...probably Mizuto.

"Sorry! They wanted me to find it, but I ended up roping you in."

"It's okay. I'm already here. Might as well help."

"Thanks! I'm sure we'll find it in no time!"

They're looking for something? Then it clicked. Madoka-san's plan was probably to naturally ask me to help look for whatever it was too and provide an opportunity for Mizuto and me to talk. She was pretty clever. But also... *He really does whatever she asks, huh?*

"Okay, go on in!"

The door opened. Mizuto's eyebrows raised as he saw me there. Madoka-san pushed him into the room.

"I'm pretty sure it's in one of those drawers. Can you two look for it? Thanks!"

"Uh-huh..." Mizuto gave a noncommittal answer and glanced at me before heading to the drawers.

This was so awkward. *You could at least acknowledge me!* But instead of saying this out loud, I headed towards the drawers too. Right as I did, Madoka-san cried out in pain.

"Oh owie! Ow!" She bent over and held her stomach. "M-My stomach! I-I need to go to the bathroom!" she exclaimed, slipping away and shutting the door behind her.

I didn't even have time to react because I was so stunned by how bad her acting was.

"I won't be back for *thirty minutes!* Nobody else will come near this room! So stay here till I come back, okay? Don't even think about taking one step outside. Got it? 'Kay bye!" Then she ran off, casting doubt on the claim that her stomach hurt in the first place.

We were left in an uncomfortable silence. *Sh-She's so bad at acting!* I wanted a refund on any thoughts I had about her being clever. It was unbelievable how ham-fisted this all was. Even Higashira-san had more grace than she! Today I learned Madoka-san was a surprisingly horrible liar.

Mizuto sighed and pushed in the drawers with papers sticking out of them. “So that’s what this is all about...” He’d caught on to why he’d been dragged here in the first place. “Thirty minutes here, huh?” Mizuto checked the time, moved over to the sliding door where it was brightest, and then began messing with his phone. He seemingly had no desire to play along with the situation that Madoka-san had set up.

“You don’t have anything to say?” I asked quietly.

Mizuto glanced at me. “Don’t *you*?” His eyes snapped back to his phone. “I’m certainly not obligated to start this conversation.”

He was right. As much as I hated to admit it, he was right. He might have wanted to try and talk things out in order to maintain our relationship when we were dating, but as stepsiblings, he didn’t need to care at all. It wasn’t like we could have a falling out and *not* be stepsiblings anymore.

He had no reason to apologize or beg for forgiveness. So unfortunately, the person who needed to start things off was...I. But I didn’t know how or where to start. How did things get like this, and what was the solution?

We’d been here for three days. The first day, I found out more about how he became who he was. The second day, I met his relatives and felt like I’d found a place in his family. But on the third day, I came to find just how small of a person I was.

I was negative, cowardly, irritable, and petty. There was no way that he wasn’t fed up. He’d definitely broken up with me because of these characteristics. The more I thought about it, the more I realized I was at fault. I was bad at dealing with things, I was bad at being perceptive, I had a bad attitude, I was bad at communication—even the situation I was in right now, I’d pretty much caused all on my own.

That’s why I held on to feelings that I should’ve thrown away long ago. *Oh, I get it.* I started to understand what the problem was and how to fix it. I knew what I needed to talk to him about. But to do that, I needed courage. I needed more courage than it took to interrupt him while reading or learn more about how he came to be the guy that he was.

What I needed to do was open an old wound—my first love. I had to rip off the scabs on my heart if I wanted to be able to move forward. I had to accept this. I sat right in front of Mizuto, who was leaning against the wall. He still didn’t look up at me. I had to do something to grab his attention.

“Irido-kun,” I called out to him, using the name that I swore I’d never use again.

His fingers stopped moving.

“Irido-kun.”

His eyes flitted between his phone and me.

“Irido-kun.” I needed to face this head-on. I needed to take care of this. I couldn’t pretend that I didn’t notice these feelings anymore. That I’d gotten over them. I had to stop pushing them aside.

“Irido-kun. Irido-kun. Irido-kun!”

I wanted to call him by this name more. A whole lot more. So much more. A year and a half is such a short time. I wanted to spend our summer vacation together. I wanted to have a second Christmas and Valentine’s Day together. I wanted a third, fourth, and fifth time—I wanted to be with him forever.

“Irido-kun...” My lips quivered. I felt tongue-tied. But I still wanted to say his name more. I wasn’t even close to being satisfied. Even after saying his name this much, I still...

“Irido...kun...”

I remembered when he’d suggested our break-up. And how relieved I’d felt when he had, like a huge weight had been lifted off my shoulders. It was over, I’d thought. It was finally over. I no longer had to feel these harsh, sad, and lonely feelings anymore. I’d really believed that from the bottom of my heart.

But even so, I began thinking about all the things we could’ve done, all the time we could’ve spent together, all the memories we could’ve made—it would’ve been so much fun. We would’ve been so happy. No matter how painful, sad, or lonely I felt, if I could’ve experienced those moments... *Oh... How nice would it have been if we hadn’t broken up?*

I regretted it. This was the first time since we’d broken up—since we’d become stepsiblings—that I felt regret. The fight that led to our breakup had been so trifling. It should’ve been easy for me to realize that I still liked him.

If I could’ve hung out with him and been by his side... If one of us had conceded and called the other over summer vacation... If I’d gotten him a Christmas present, if I’d made him chocolates for Valentine’s Day, if I’d told him that I didn’t want to break up—I’d had so many chances. I’d had an infinite number of chances and yet I still somehow let them all slip me by.

I’d stupidly expected that he’d do something because he was such a nice guy. *I’m so stupid! I’m such an idiot!* Focusing on my new class, making friends, studying for entrance exams—those were all excuses I made to distract myself from what I really wanted, and now look where that had gotten me. I was a mess of unresolved feelings.

“Irido-kun!”

You don’t have to respond. I’d make sure to end this by myself. *You don’t have to respond.* After I got over this wave of emotions, I was sure I’d go back to normal. *You don’t have to respond.* He was right. He had

no obligation to.

I can't cry. I couldn't let him feel sympathy for me. *I can't cry.* If I let him comfort me, we'd just be back to where we started. *I can't cry.* I was the one who threw away the person who wiped away my tears.

"Ayai..."

It happened so suddenly I thought I was hearing things. There was no way he'd call me that anymore. But in the next moment, I felt his fingers gently stroking my cheek. It was *real*.

"This is a onetime thing..." Mizuto was on his knees right in front of me. "Let's return to the past, Ayai." He turned off his phone and dropped it. There was no other way to tell time in this room. We had no way of telling what year, month, or day it was.

"A-Ah..." In the next moment, I was wailing and embracing Mizuto with all the strength in my body. "Irido-kun, Irido-kun, Irido-kun, Irido-kun!"

"Ayai," he gently responded, rubbing my back.

I wanted to apologize for everything—for getting jealous, for not mending things between us. Maybe if I'd been able to do that, this year could've been different. But neither of us tried to apologize. After all...it was over. It was all in the past. New things could only begin because old things had ended.

I started to slightly understand what Higashira-san felt when she had the person she'd been rejected by comfort her—the wound of a lost love. The wound from unresolved feelings. You needed to have someone with the same wounds as you to comfort each other. I shouldn't have been sympathizing with Higashira-san, but with the only person in the world who could understand this pain—Irido-kun.

We held each other in the faint, moonlit room. We didn't kiss. After all, he wasn't my boyfriend, and I wasn't his girlfriend. Not anymore.

"About five minutes left," Mizuto said in a low voice, checking his phone.

Only five minutes until Madoka-san would come back as promised. It wouldn't be surprising if she came a few minutes earlier or later, though. I'd exhausted myself from crying and was leaning against the wall, looking at myself in a pocket mirror. *Oh god, my eyes are so red.* Anybody would be able to tell that I'd been bawling if they saw me.

"So..." Mizuto began saying as he sat back down next to me.

"What'd I do to make you avoid me? I still have no clue."

Oh, right... I haven't said anything about that. From his viewpoint, all I'd done was suddenly start crying while calling him the way I used to. I was surprised that he'd dealt with me the way that he did. Was

he a mind reader? Nobody was *this* perceptive. I wasn't going to deny it. I really liked that about him. Emphasis on "liked," as in past tense.

"Who cares anymore?" I shrugged. "I feel better now. It's passed through my system."

"Whatever it is, it's still in mine."

"Why don't you let it out, then?"

"I'm constipated. Probably from the stress that a certain somebody's caused me."

How rude. I've always hated that about him. Past *and* present.

I exhaled and looked up at the ceiling, preparing myself for what I was going to say next. "First love..."

"Huh?"

"It kinda pissed me off thinking how Madoka-san was probably your first love." *Ugh, this is so embarrassing! Don't make me say this!* I nervously glanced at him to see how he was going to make fun of me, but I was met by a look of confusion.

"My first love? Madoka-san?"

"Huh?" *Wait, he's genuinely confused?!* "Sh-She's not?"

"I don't remember ever feeling that way about her."

"B-But most boys fall for an older girl in their family."

"Most. Not all."

"W-Well, yeah, sure, but you listen to whatever she tells you to do! Whenever I ask you to do anything you ignore me!"

"Well, Madoka-san's pushy." Mizuto let out an exasperated sigh. "You've experienced it too, haven't you? She made you wait here, didn't she?"

"Oh..." *He has a point.*

"Sure, of all my relatives I've talked to Madoka-san the most because she's the closest to me in age, but I've never liked her like that. If anything, I got annoyed that she'd always try to hang around me even if I didn't want her to. I'm used to it by now, though..." He exhaled again. "Now I get it. I had a feeling you had some kind of misunderstanding after you asked me that weird question yesterday. You're usually so smart, but you're an absolute dunce when it comes to important stuff like this."

"Grr..." *It really is my fault this time around.*

I heard the sound of footsteps approaching. It must've been Madoka-san. Mizuto stood up and looked down at me.

"You okay now, *Yume*?" he asked, his body bathed in the moonlight.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Thanks, *Mizuto*."

We weren't calling each other by our first names because we'd gotten closer. It was simply for convenience's sake now that we had the same last name. Nothing had changed between us.

“Heh, heh...” I wasn’t sure why, but I began laughing. Maybe it’s because after all this time, I realized that I’d gotten a sibling.

“See? I told you.”

“Huh?” I looked up at Mizuto, but he was looking at the sliding door, towards the footsteps that were approaching as if he was trying to hide his face.



“I told you that my first love was someone who laughed a lot...idiot.”

Right at that moment, I was really grateful that the light in this room didn't work.

The Ex-Couple Visits Family (4)

First Kiss Manifesto

In what could only be described as a folly of youth, I had a so-called boyfriend during the eighth and ninth grade. I really enjoyed our time as a couple. That's right, I wasn't going to skirt around the truth anymore. I was done being stubborn. The days I spent as Mizuto Irido's girlfriend—specifically before summer break—were most likely some of the happiest days of my life.

The best day of our relationship wasn't Christmas, nor was it Valentine's Day—it wasn't any sort of holiday. It was just another school day. As usual, we left the classroom separately so we could meet up outside of school to walk home together.

We'd already been dating for a bit, so holding hands wasn't embarrassing anymore. However, I was nervous about taking the next step in our relationship: kissing. I'd looked on the internet the night before to find out when it was normal for couples to have their first kiss. The search produced varying results. Some said after a certain number of dates, while others said after a certain number of months. The variance in data made it kind of hard for me to determine when exactly the best time was. I couldn't get all the different answers out of my head.

I glanced at my boyfriend as we continued walking, hand in hand. It was about time, wasn't it? Though the exact timing differed among various stories and recountings that I'd read online, we'd mostly gone through the generally agreed-upon prerequisites. We could kiss now...couldn't we?

Suddenly, I started to get nervous. We'd walked this way home so many times by now I should've been comfortable. I started freaking out. Were my hands too sweaty? Was I squeezing too tight? I was worried that he might've caught onto what I was thinking about, but at the same time, I hoped he would notice and make the first move.

I may have been naive back then, but not enough to believe that Mizuto Irido would be the one to initiate our first kiss. Which meant *I* had to take the lead. But...how was I supposed to do that?

I hadn't realized that we'd reached the spot where we'd go our separate ways in the time that I'd agonized over this. Usually, I wouldn't be upset about leaving each other because I knew we could still talk over the phone. Plus, we'd see each other at school the next

day. But...

“Okay, see you tomorrow.” Irido-kun waved at me and turned to leave.

Without thinking, I quickly grabbed his arm.

“Hm?” Irido-kun turned to look at me, confused.

And so, I stared. I stared and I stared at him, because that’s all I could do. I prayed that he’d pick up on what I wanted. At the end of it all, I shut my eyes and lifted my chin, leaving myself to his mercy. If he’d ignored *this* obvious of a hint, I’d have had no choice but to die on the spot. I’d pretty much burned my bridge of retreat. The only way was forward.

My heart was beating out of my chest. My body had stiffened so much that it felt like I’d become a statue. Though it’d only been a few seconds, it felt like an eternity. *Why did I shut my eyes?!* If I’d at least kept my eyes open, I could’ve seen his reaction. But I just knew that if I opened my eyes, everything would fall apart. *Argh, what should I do?! You’re still here, right, Irido-kun? This is your arm I’m holding, right?! You’re still alive, right? You aren’t leaving me by myse—*

And just as I thought that, I felt a soft sensation on my lips. All the stiffness in my body melted away. My heart calmed down. Warmth spread across my body as blood once again coursed through it. And then our teeth made contact, prompting us to move our mouths away from each other.

I finally opened my eyes to the face of my boyfriend, tinged red with both embarrassment and the setting sun.

“It’s...” I felt a calm, comfortable warmth run up my face. “It’s harder than I thought,” I said, hiding my mouth with my hand. I tried to laugh to hide my shame.

“We’ll work on it,” he said with a gentle smile.

That moment was the happiest I’ve ever felt in my life. Thinking about the future and how we’d share more and more of these moments together filled me with so much joy. I started wondering if it was okay for me to be so happy. I felt so light, like I was floating on air.

When I got back home, I changed my phone’s passcode to that day’s date. I’d had a feeling that those days would continue forever...even if they didn’t. Everything—good or bad— comes to an end. In a sense, this was symbolic of who I was as a person—someone who relied on others to make the first move. That part of me was precisely why Yume Ayai was alone that fateful summer festival.

Yume Irido

“Lookin’ cool, Yume-chan!” Madoka-san excitedly circled around me like a vulture, carefully examining every last inch of me. “You’re

slender. It's like you were born to wear traditional Japanese clothes. You're perfect! The spitting image of a traditional Japanese beauty! We should get you in Taisho clothes next! I'll get them for you!"

"N-No, that's perfectly all right. A yukata's enough for me." I recoiled a bit from her. The level of excitement she had right now was a little off-putting.

I looked at myself and couldn't help but remember the yukata I'd worn on my first date with Mizuto. It had been dark blue, but this time, Madoka-san had steered me away from those cold tones. I was wearing a much flashier white yukata with a red flower pattern.

"You're even prettier than the fireworks! Ah, what have I done? Now the fireworks are ruined. Everyone's gonna be looking at you!"

"Um... Are you making fun of me?"

"What?! No, I'm being serious right now!" Madoka-san frowned as if I'd insulted her.

Unlike me, she had on a dark blue yukata, the color of the night. Apparently, she'd intentionally chosen a contrasting color to mine.

"All righty, let's get goin'! Mizuto-kun's waitin'!"

"What does he have to do with anything?"

"Okay, okay. No matter what you say, I wanna see his reaction!"

She hurried me out the door before I could refuse. There was a car waiting for us outside the gate. Since the festival was in the city, Mineaki-ojisan had volunteered to drive us...and have a date with mom while he was at it.

Mizuto and Chikuma-kun were already waiting by the gate. They turned around to look at us as we approached. Madoka-san pushed me in front of her and peeked over my shoulder to see Mizuto's reaction.

"Whaddya think? Beautiful, isn't she?" Madoka-san grinned.

Mizuto looked at me with his usual dispassionate eyes, appraising my yukata while wearing a gray yukata himself...

"Can..."

"Hm?" Madoka-san shot me a confused look, but I paid her no intention and continued.

"Can I take your picture?!" I asked, tottering over to him. *He looks so good in it! Who is that?! He was born to wear Japanese clothes!* His slender body and slanted shoulders, and the overall line of his body perfectly displayed the simplicity of the yukata. I needed to document this. *I need this on my phone!*

"I'm kinda creeped out, so no." Mizuto glared at me as I took a step forward.

"Why?! What's creepy? Are you saying you in your yukata's creepy?! Because it's not. You look hotter than anyone in the world right now! I don't care who you are—don't you *dare* make fun of the way you look in that yukata!"

“I’m saying *you’re* creepy! How the hell does your mind work?!”

This blasphemous fool! I’m gonna take a picture, permission or not! As I pulled out my phone, I had a feeling that Madoka-san was wryly smiling.

“And you call *me* creepy...?” she said.

“We’ll go park the car.”

“Be careful, kids!”

Mom and Mineaki-ojisan dropped us off and headed to the almost full parking lot. As they drove away, I scanned the area.

“There are so many people...”

“Crazy, isn’t it? Like a hundred times more people than the population of the town we’re staying in,” Madoka-san said.

There had been a lot of people around the station the last time we were here, since there were plenty of stores to visit. Even so, there hadn’t been nearly as many people as there were now. There was a literal sea of people here; taking even one step in any direction meant running into someone. Where did they all come from?

“The festival here’s pretty famous—I mean, not Gion Festival famous, but there’s a good number of people who come out here just for this,” Madoka-san continued.

“There are fireworks at this festival, right? Are they that special?” I asked, curiously.

“Oh yeah, they’re definitely worth the trip. Plus, the shrines around here make a killing.”

“Why’s that?”

Madoka-san snickered. “Relationship luck,” she said through a teasing grin.

“Uh... Well, I don’t need any luck in romance.”

“Whaddya mean? They’re for all sorts of relationships, not just romantic ones. Funny how your mind jumped to that conclusion, though. Anyone particular in mind? Come on, you can tell me.”

“Ugh...” She was starting to get on my nerves.

“Well, anyway, as you can guess, the festival’s a big date spot. Don’t feel pressured to stop by the shrine or anything, though. Enjoy the day in your own way.” Madoka-san stuck her hand out to Chikuma-kun and he obediently took it. “It’d be bad if we got separated, y’know?” She flashed a look at me and Mizuto after saying that. She wasn’t even trying to be subtle.

Mizuto exhaled slightly. “We’re not kids. On the off chance we get separated, we can just head ho—”

But I grabbed his hand before he could finish that thought. He looked down at my hand and then back to me.

“What’s the big idea?”

“It’s my duty as the older sister to make sure that you don’t get lost. Isn’t that right, Madoka-san?”

“Precisely!”

The two of us laughed at our inside joke. *I’m done being stubborn over trivial things like this, Mizuto-kun.*

“Fine, I’ll hold your hand. Happy?” He sheepishly averted his gaze.

“Yes. Good boy.”

“Shut up...”

I giggled as we began walking shoulder to shoulder. My mind felt so clear after crying my eyes out in front of him yesterday. There wasn’t anything weighing me down. I felt like I was able to interact with him more easily than before. If I removed the label of “ex” from him, he was just a fun-to-tease, sulky individual with poor communication skills.

I made sure to keep my eyes on Madoka-san as she led us towards our destination. “Why did you come today?” I asked curiously. “You hate crowds.”

“Who doesn’t? Anyway, Madoka-san drags me here every year without fail, so I’ve just given up on fighting her.”

“Uh-huh...” *You sure you didn’t come because you wanted to see my yukata?* As much as I wanted to ask him that, I decided against it. The mere idea of yukatas and festivals weighed heavily on my mind.

I remembered the painful memories from that fateful summer festival back in the ninth grade. Because of a fight we’d had before it, our relationship had gotten messed up, and we ended up spending our entire summer break without making even a single plan together. Even so, I’d dressed up in my yukata and gone to the summer festival, praying that he’d show up.

After all, it was the anniversary of our first date. I clung on to the sliver of hope that he’d come to the festival on his own and find me. At the end of my hope was nothing but despair. No matter how long I waited, I was alone at the festival from start to finish. He most likely had no clue that any of this had happened.

That was my last memory of wearing a yukata at a summer festival—loneliness, helplessness, and the crushing realization that we were over. Even though I’d been able to push those unresolved feelings down, the pain of it left a scar on me—one that I’d bear for the rest of my life.

As we followed the crowd of people, we ended up at the brightly lit path to the shrine. Various food stalls lined up on either side of the path had takoyaki, cotton candy, cucumber on a stick, chocolate bananas, okonomiyaki, cucumber on a stick, yakisoba, fried chicken, cucumber, cucumber, cucumber...

“Why’s there so much cucumber?”

“Yeah, it’s like this every year. There’s always a lot.” Madoka-san laughed.

There were a ton of stalls that had rows of cucumbers that had been seasoned and pierced with a stick. There were as many of these stalls as there were of the more traditionally popular ones like takoyaki and yakisoba. *Is there really that much of a demand?*

“Anything you guys wanna eat?” Madoka-san asked. “I’ve secured funds from grandma, so lemme know.”

“These stalls are obviously overpriced. Makes me want to go to a convenience store instead,” I commented.

“Don’t worry about it! There aren’t many convenience stores around here. You can thank us being out in the boonies for that.” Madoka-san snickered.

So she isn’t going to deny that the stuff here’s overpriced? But thinking about this a different way, it was the same logic as the pricing at coffee shops—you paid for the atmosphere. Plus, the takoyaki you bought at these stalls had to be different from the ones you could buy at food courts, right?

“If you don’t know what to get, how about I take you to my friend’s spot? I hope they’re here, at least.”

“Your friend? Don’t you only come here once a year? How did you make a friend like that? Are they local?” I asked, absolutely confused.

“Remember this well. *That’s* what a real socialite looks like,” Mizuto said.

“You make it sound like I’m not a real socialite.”

“Yeah, you’re not.”

“Stop saying that!”

“Hiding the truth doesn’t make it any less true.”

Says the person whose entire high school life’s strategy is to hide the truth!

Madoka-san eventually led us to a certain stand.

“Wassup? Glad to see you’re back!” she called out to the owner of the stand.

“Oh, Madoka-chan! You’re looking great as always!”

“Thanks!” She giggled.

She’d led us to an older guy with dark skin. I was pretty sure he was Indian, but I couldn’t tell if his accent was genuine or not. I noticed that he was stirring a big pot of curry. Actually, he was such a walking stereotype that it was kinda suspicious.

“Here, try my tandoori chicken curry. You’ll love it!”

Chikuma-kun reached his small hand out to give the man money for the food.

“Oh hey, Chikuma-kun! Thanks! My curry’s even better than the

kind you can get in India!”

Chikuma-kun seemed completely unfazed as he took the plate of tandoori chicken curry. I guess he was used to this.

“I guess it *is* a unique opportunity...” I said.

“Kay! Two more!” Madoka-san called out.

“You got it!”

She didn’t even ask Mizuto before ordering his portion, but it didn’t seem like he cared too much. Before I knew it, a plate of tandoori chicken curry was in front of me. I had to be careful not to get my yukata dirty. I cautiously loaded my mouth with the food and was immediately met with the taste of chicken and spices.

“It’s...really good,” I said.

“I know, right?! He makes good stuff even though he’s kinda sus,” Madoka-san excitedly agreed.

“Me? Suspicious? Oh, you and your jokes.”

So Madoka-san and I had the same impression. Meanwhile, Mizuto was silently and expressionlessly stuffing his face with the tandoori chicken. I had absolutely no clue what was going through his mind.

“Taste good?”

“I guess...”

“You *guess*? Is it good or not?”

He clammed up. He must’ve really hated me asking him.

“Aw, Chikuma, your mouth is a mess. Stay still. I’ll wipe you clean.”

“I can do i— Mmff.” Chikuma-kun got out a few words before Madoka-san began wiping his mouth with a tissue. He must’ve been embarrassed because he was resisting her. This reminded me of when I’d wiped his mouth at the barbecue. Just as I began to space out, I felt Madoka-san flashing another look at me. My eyes widened and I spun around to look at Mizuto’s mouth, which had some curry around it.

“Mizuto—” As soon as I turned around, tissue ready in my hand, Mizuto wiped his mouth clean with his finger. *Dammit!* I couldn’t believe I’d missed my chance. I’d done it at the barbecue, so why not now?!

“What’re you playing at?” he asked.

“If I do the same thing as Madoka-san, that makes me the older sibling, right?”

“Hell no.”

“It does!”

I’d been an only child until recently, so I was still kind of figuring out what it meant to have a sibling. But as long as I followed Madoka-san’s lead, I could easily become like an older sister. By mimicking her, I’d naturally end up being recognized as the elder sibling. I had a

leg up on Mizuto since he didn't have an example to learn from. *Heh heh, my strategy is flawless.*

Madoka-san's snickering brought me out of my thoughts.

"Interesting..."

We were currently walking the remainder of the path, which was hard due to the sheer number of people. I could barely see where we were going.

"Oh, look, Chikuma! A shooting range! Wanna play?" Madoka-san asked.

Chikuma-kun's eyes lit up when he saw the prizes. On one of the shelves, there was a game, which was, of course, positioned in a way that it'd be hard to knock down.

"Y-Yeah..." Chikuma-kun replied.

"All righty! Let's get the top prize together!" Madoka-san said, paying the fee and handing Chikuma-kun the air rifle.

He bent over to aim at the game. The barrel of the gun shook as he took aim. He most likely wasn't strong enough to hold it steady. Just as I was thinking that there was no way that he was going to hit the prize, Madoka-san intervened.

"Aw, jeez. You gotta hold it better," Madoka-san chuckled. She circled behind him and reached around to help support his arms.

"I-I can do it by myself..."

"Don't be shy! Steady..."

A-Are siblings allowed to be so close to each other? Her boobs are pressed up right against him. He can definitely feel her breath against his ear. But maybe it's not a big deal because they're siblings...

Pop! Chikuma-kun took a shot but unfortunately missed his target.

"Aw, that sucks. We're not gonna get anywhere like this... Mizuto-kun, you're up!"

Mizuto's eye twitched.

"Get revenge for Chikuma! Yume-chan'll back you up. You can count on her as your big sister." As soon as I saw Madoka-san's face, I knew she'd set me up. She must've heard me talking about doing the same things as she did.

"Fine. I'll give it a shot."

Has he not caught on? He paid the fee and got the rifle. Maybe he actually wanted to make Chikuma-kun feel better. He leaned over to position the gun and I froze.

"What's the matter, Yume-chan?" Madoka-san whispered in my ear. "You gotta help out your little brother."

"Y-Yeah, but..."

"Hm, what's so embarrassing about hugging your little brother? It's no big deal, right?"

I-I didn't realize Madoka-san was this much of a bully! I had no

escape. The only option left to me was to do what Madoka-san had done. I approached Mizuto from behind. At first, I wasn't sure if I could use the same excuse as she had, but he was just as much of a string bean as Chikuma-kun, so he wasn't able to hold the gun steady. There was no way he could hit the game like this and get revenge for Chikuma-kun. *Oh... He really is doing this for Chikuma-kun.* I finally found my resolve and reached from behind to support his arms.

"Wha— Hey!"

"D-Don't look at me. L-Look at the target!" I forced him to face forward. I slowly reached out and placed my hands on his wrists. *They're so thin, but I can still feel muscle. They really are different from a girl's...* I wondered if he'd have the same sort of thoughts. Would he think that I felt different than a guy?

"Aren't you a little too far to the right?"

"Not at all."

"You're crooked!"

"Ugh, fine. This good?"

"Now you're too far to the left!"

After squabbling with each other, we finally agreed on a direction. All that was left to do was pull the trigger, but...I felt my arms shaking. It'd taken everything I had to make sure that my body—mainly my chest—didn't come into contact with his back while I gripped his wrists. It'd taken longer than I'd expected to agree on an angle, so I could feel myself losing strength.

"Okay..." Mizuto held his breath and was about to pull the trigger when my arms gave out.

"Ah!"

Allow me to preface this before going any further. As middle schoolers, we'd kissed during the peak of our horniness. But even so, first base was as far as we'd gone. Touching...being touched... Those weren't things we ever did!

My elbow bent and my body leaned forward and his shoulders came in contact with my chest.

Mizuto's body immediately jumped a little and the gun went off, completely missing the target.

"Aw..." Madoka-san mumbled, disappointed.

We'd missed, and it was completely my fault. But then, I heard the sound of something else being hit. We'd ended up shooting the white rabbit plushie right below the game that Chikuma-kun wanted.

"Oh, nice shot!" the guy running the stall said. "Here ya go." He exchanged the gun in Mizuto's hand for the plushie.

The two of us silently stared at the plushie that looked like some sort of mascot.

"Did you do that on purpose?" Mizuto asked.

“O-Of course not! My arms got tired, and—”

“Okay. I’m glad my stepsister isn’t a slut.”

“A-A *what?*! Wh-What about you? I felt you react! Barely anything happened! You should already be used to it with Higashira-san!”

“That’s different.”

“Huh?”

“Higashira clings to me without thinking too much about it, but you absolutely freak out. Calm down!”

“Y-You make it sound like I’m not as used to guys as she is! Maybe you’re just too sensitive, you closet perv!”

“Okay, you two. If you’re gonna argue, do it somewhere you won’t bother the other customers.” Madoka-san pushed us away from the stall and off the path, where many people were hanging out and eating.

I glanced at Mizuto, who was holding the plushie. “It really doesn’t suit you...”

“Ugh, it’s always something with you. Can’t you keep some thoughts to yourself?”

“Heh, what’s the matter? You know, now that I look at it, the plushie makes you seem a little more approachable. Maybe you should take it with you everywhere you go.”

“Like hell I will. I’m *just* carrying it. What do I look like? A certain young girl with darkness in her heart, carrying around a rabbit plushie everywhere?”

I have no clue what he’s referencing. At any rate, the idea of Mizuto with this plushie in his room was a great image. It totally didn’t suit him. If Higashira-san saw this in his room, I could only imagine what she’d say. “*Huh? Are you trying to go for the gap moe angle? Aren’t you being a little too ham-fisted with it? Gap moe isn’t even that big of a thing right now.*”

I noticed that Chikuma-kun was staring at it. *Oh, right, wasn’t the entire point to get revenge for Chikuma-kun?* But would a boy be happy getting a cute plushie like that?

“Hm?” Mizuto noticed Chikuma-kun’s gaze on the plushie. “Oh, I see,” he muttered. “Here.” With that, he shoved the plushie into Chikuma-kun’s arms.

He reflexively accepted it and blinked in confusion. “U-Uh...”

“I don’t need it. Take it,” Mizuto said curtly.

Chikuma-kun gripped the plushie. “Th-Thank you...”

It looks good with Chikuma-kun. He was already a cute kid, so adding the plushie to the mix really added to it. Plus, the way he was smiling made it obvious that he wanted it.

“How’d you know?” I whispered to Mizuto.

“It’s from a game.”

“Huh? Really?”

“Pokémon. I’ve seen him play the games.”

Oh, that sounds right, now that I think about it. I looked at the euphoric Chikuma-kun and then at my surly little stepbrother.

“Despite how quiet you are, you’re surprisingly observant.”

“I’m sure he’s got it pretty rough with a personality like that.”

Mizuto wasn’t shy, but he wasn’t good in groups. Both of us felt a kinship with Chikuma-kun. Mizuto’d been just as worried about him as I. He should’ve just sat down and talked to Chikuma-kun. I wondered how he’d react if he found out that Chikuma-kun looked up to him.

“You’re even awkward when you act like an older brother, you know that?”

“What do you mean ‘even’? When have I ever been awkward?”

“You’re giving me even more reason to not let you be my older brother.”

“It’s a hell of a lot better than you being my older sister.”

He really couldn’t play nice. *He could stand to learn a thing or two from Chikuma-kun.* Watching him “angrily” snort and look away made me giggle.

After taking a break, Madoka-san took us around the stalls again. We ate some takoyaki and cotton candy, tried goldfish scooping, and got our futures read at an automated fortune teller. It must’ve been broken, because it told me that my romantic future looked great.

We slowly made our way to the shrine. Apparently, it was open to people who wanted to pray. I wasn’t exactly interested in that, but I would’ve loved the opportunity to give the god of relationships a good smack in the face if at all possible. We weren’t here for that, though. We were going to see the fireworks. The shrine was pretty crowded, so it was probably best to find and secure a spot as soon as possible. With that in mind, I turned to Madoka-san.

“What time are the fireworks?” I asked her.

“They should be around eight,” Madoka-san said as she rolled a lollipop around in her mouth. “It’s okay, though. I asked for help securing a spot.”

“Who’d you ask?”

“Our family.”

I followed her gaze, and I saw our parents talking with someone in front of what appeared to be the shrine’s office. They really looked like they were on a date.

“Who are they talking to? I asked.”

“Mm, I dunno. I feel like I know that old lady. I used to be a sort of celebrity in our hometown, so I hung out with the adults a lot,”

Madoka-san replied.

Did that mean that mom was greeting an acquaintance? Or did she just happen to run into someone and was having a conversation? *Should I be with her?*

“Oh, Yume! Mizuto-kun!” Mom waved at us.

I immediately let go of Mizuto’s hand as the four of us walked towards her. It would’ve been too annoying if I’d kept it up in front of our parents.

“Perfect timing! Kedouin-san, this is my daughter, Yume.”

“Oh, you have such an adorable daughter! Your yukata suits you very well. It’s rare for youngsters to look good in a yukata.”

“Thank you. Nice to meet you...” She hadn’t really been properly introduced to me, so I could only really guess that she was some woman from a rich family. She had the aura of a celebrity.

“I’m jealous. With a daughter like that, you’ll never have to worry about her getting married. Not like my granddaughter who’s already thirty. Who knows what she’s doing...”

“Thirty’s still young! Don’t worry!” Madoka-san said, casually entering the conversation with this stranger.

She’s so brave...or maybe insensitive. From the bottom of my heart, I truly wished I could even have a shred of her personality.

“Looks like Mizuto-kun has more to his family than just his father now,” Kedouin-san said with a warm smile while looking at me. “I’d only really heard things from Natsume, so I was a little worried. I know your new environment might still take some getting used to, but please look after Mizuto-kun.”

“Okay...” I nodded.

I felt weird. It was as if she saw Mizuto as some kind of pitiful being that couldn’t live without the support of another. That was nothing like the guy I knew. The Mizuto Irido I knew purposely distanced himself from others and took care of things by himself. I’d never thought of him as pitiful even once. Were we really talking about the same person?

“The Tanesato family has secured a good place to watch the fireworks from. Follow me,” the woman said.

“Thanks as always,” Mineaki-ojisan said.

“What do you four want to do?” mom asked. “There’s still some time before the fireworks start.”

I looked back, and it was only then that I realized Mizuto wasn’t there. It was as if he’d faded into the crowd.

“Uh...”

He hadn’t run away, nor was he avoiding us. He’d really faded away. It was as if he’d disappeared from this world without a trace.

“Ugh, he disappeared again.” Madoka-san furrowed her brow.

“Why does he always go off and disappear right before the fireworks start?”

Just then, the events of the past few days played back in my head.

On the first day here, Mizuto had been thanked by Mineaki-*ojisan* before leaving the dinner. I understood why that was now. He’d been thanked for sticking around. Mizuto was uncomfortable being there, and his dad knew that.

On the second day, Mizuto made absolutely no effort to participate in the barbecue. He kept himself immersed in his book—he didn’t so much as look up. It was only after I interacted with him that he started to loosen up a bit.

On the third day, he was obviously put in a bad mood after seeing me talking to Chikuma-kun. He was acting almost the same way as a kid who’d had his toy taken away. It wasn’t as if he resented or blamed Chikuma-kun, though.

And then today, I saw that Mizuto wasn’t necessarily ignoring his relatives. If anything, he was watching them closely. If he hadn’t been, there’s no way that he would’ve known to give Chikuma-kun the plushie.

I continued to remember other things. I remembered his expressionless face as he’d sat in front of the altar on Mother’s Day. I remembered Higashira-san fearing that she’d lose her place in Mizuto’s heart. I remembered the reason he rejected Higashira-san—the fact that he only had the capacity to truly face one person, and that seat was already filled.

And then I remembered our phone conversation.

“Ayai... Never mind... My phone’s about to die,” he’d said.

Back then, I’d lamented the fact that he could’ve just charged his phone...but what if he’d been in a place where he couldn’t readily charge his phone? I checked the time on my phone. It was August 12th, 7:26 p.m.

Oh. Oh, that’s right. I get it. I get it now. I hadn’t known back then, but I did now. It’d taken me two years, but now I understood that he went back to his dad’s hometown every year and to this summer festival.

“How I wish you’d stopped me.” The words of his great-grandfather flashed through my head.

I’d seen so many different sides of Mizuto Irido. I’d seen him as a classmate, as a boyfriend, and as my stepbrother. They were all different pieces of a puzzle that were only now coming together to form a picture of this guy that I thought I knew. I wouldn’t have known him like this just by being his girlfriend.

People’s natures are set in stone. There was nothing he could’ve done to change who he was. Everything he was and would become

followed a natural trajectory. That's what others understood and expected from him. Even he'd admit it. The person known as Mizuto Irido was completed, but he had reservations about that. He'd fought against it. The girl known as Yume Ayai had been his only way to fight. Against what? Against the trap that a higher power had set—fate.

"I..." That's why the following words came out of my mouth. "I'll be right back." As a person who'd also been at the mercy of a higher power, I didn't have a choice.

"Hm? Okay, be safe," Madoka-san said before lightly chuckling. The time he'd called me was still in my call history.

Mizuto Irido

As long as I could remember, I hadn't felt anything. No matter what I did, I felt like an outsider. No matter what I saw, it looked fake. What people knew as life, I felt was just something on the other side of a monitor. This wasn't me trying to mimic *No Longer Human*—I just really had no feelings.

When my classmates would be happy, sad, or mad, I couldn't empathize whatsoever. None of their feelings resonated with me. Probably because I knew that they were saying the same empty words that I'd heard time and time again.

"*Thank goodness you were born healthy.*"

"You must be so sad without your mother. *You poor thing.*"

I'd heard these words over and over and over and over again. Like I gave a damn. I really didn't. What about me made you say that? Was I doing something out of the ordinary? *I'm breathing, just like you. Why are you praising me? Why do you have to see me as some kind of charity case?*

I couldn't understand. A hole opened inside me because I couldn't understand. Everything I saw and heard got sucked into it. The only things that ever felt real were the books I read.

I'll never forget the first time I read my great-grandfather's *The Siberian Dancer Girl*. The words weren't in color. There weren't any pictures, but even still, it felt like a movie was playing before my eyes. I could vividly see the emotions and characters.

Even though I couldn't resonate with anyone in real life, after interacting with the world of words, I finally felt as though my heart was filled. *The Dancing Girl* taught me the weakness of people. *Rashomon* taught me the ego of people. *Sangetsuki* taught me the pride of people. And then *Kokoro* taught me about the souls of people.

For me, fiction was turning into truth. The world I'd been reading about was becoming more real than the world I lived in. If anything, *reality* felt like fiction. So even when I met Yume Ayai, it felt like I was

just going through the motions. Talking to her was honestly nothing more than a whim.

Even when I continued to meet her in the library, it felt like I was watching myself through a monitor. Things only changed when we had our first date at the summer festival. That klutz got lost and bawled to me over the phone. I was annoyed to my core. I couldn't believe that such a weak person existed. It was like she couldn't even breathe if there wasn't someone holding her hand. I was sure that if I abandoned her, she'd keep crying in some dark place that nobody knew about.

That's when I thought, "Oh, how pitiful." It was only then that I finally realized what exactly I was looking at. Ayai was clumsy, weak, and dependent. I knew that from the beginning, but it was just information. It was just like when I was reading— No, this feeling burned inside me even more intensely. That was you, Ayai.

The only person I ever felt was real was you. Sure, it might've just been a temporary lapse of judgment—an illusion caused by my brain. I knew that now that everything was over. But even so...why could I still feel the heat from the feelings I had back then inside me?

All we'd done was go back to how we used to be. There was nothing burdensome left. *So...why can't I move on?!*

Yume Irido

Let me be up-front for a moment: I had absolutely no evidence to support the following actions. All I had was a feeling, which pushed me to break from the sea of people and walk this path a little ways off of the main temple walkway.

At the very least, even if it did lead into the forest, it was still stone-paved, so it wasn't too difficult to follow while wearing traditional Japanese sandals. I saw a small shrine. It was so dark that I could barely see anything around me. I couldn't believe that there was a festival not even that far away with how dark it was.

There may have been some stone lanterns, but they didn't look like they'd been used in forever. The moonlight illuminated the shrine grounds, which were about as big as a basketball court.

The path led into the grounds and ended at the shrine, where Mizuto Irido sat halfway up the stairs. He wasn't doing anything in particular—just vacantly staring into the starry sky. I knew I had to do something to catch his attention, so I made sure to step a little harder against the stone to assert my presence.

"You must *really* like dark places." My comment was filled with my usual sarcastic tone. "You're like the reincarnation of a green bean. Not only do you like the shade, but you're just as lanky and weak. You can't even hold a toy gun without your arms shaking."

Mizuto's eyes fell from the sky and onto me. His brow was furrowed. *Yes, look at me. You can shun me. You can hate me. I'm not your girlfriend anymore.*

"Did you really come all this way just to annoy me? Wanna throw more shade on how I'm just a lonely bastard who can't even fit in with his relatives?"

"Of course not. I already knew that about you. What good would it do to rehash that? Talk about a waste of time."

"Hmph."

I slowly took step after step towards him, getting close enough that I could hear his breathing. I could smell him. I could sense his warmth.

I didn't think it was a miracle that he'd been born despite his mother's weak constitution. It was her own effort. Kana Irido had given everything she had in order to give birth to him. Why should he be praised for what she'd done? In the same way, I didn't think he should be pitied for not having a mother while growing up.

I might've been pitiable because I didn't have a dad around, but that's because I actually knew him. I'd lived in a house with both my parents, and it hurt losing him. I knew the pain of losing a parent, but he didn't. He'd grown up without a mother from the start.

People pitying him for not having a mother was just them forcing their values onto him. It was the same as people being condescending and pitying people who'd never been in love before. All they're doing is forcing what they know onto others because they pity them.

When people told him how "happy" they were for him and how they "felt bad" for him, he didn't understand at all. These weren't feelings that originated with him; he didn't view himself like that at all. If there was an observer effect—similar to the one in quantum mechanics—that affected personalities, it'd make sense that a void in him would've been created. One that was formed by people perceiving him as a pitiable child who had no mother.

His words replayed in my head. *"Even so, I read it all. It was the first story I'd ever read from cover to cover by myself."*

As a certain author once said, "I believe that writing and reading novels is our one way of protesting against the fact that we only live once."

He was right. It was a form of protest. Just as I'd admired the great fictional detectives who'd come up with amazing deductions without even batting an eye, Mizuto was enticed by the lives of different people to protest the fact that people saw him as pitiful.

Mizuto Irido didn't have anything. He borrowed from others to fill the void inside him. Not knowing his mom wasn't pitiable, sad, or lonely. Not having anything in the first place meant that he had

nothing to lose. But then he *did* gain something, and he lost that too. That was probably the only thing that someone could pity him for. *Isn't that right, Mizuto?* After all, the love he'd lost was standing right in front of him.

"Two years ago..." I started as I got closer to him, "we had our first date at a summer festival. I got lost and cried to you over the phone."

"Huh...?" Mizuto looked confused, but I stayed calm and continued. I wasn't scared to talk anymore.

"A few days later I got a call from you at night. Do you remember?" The wind started blowing, rustling the leaves in the trees around us. "I do. I remember in the background, there was the soft sound of trees swaying in the wind. You called me when you were here...didn't you?" That'd been the only home visit during which he'd called someone. "You..." I began giggling in a way I never would've been able to two years ago. "You really liked me, didn't you?"

I'd always thought that I'd been the one to confess to him, but that wasn't true. He'd always spent his time alone. The very fact that he openly invited me to spend time with him was almost like a confession. If that didn't count, I didn't know what did.

Mizuto didn't say a word. He turned his head, his facial expression unchanging. I glanced at my phone to check the time. *She said eight o'clock, right?* I sat down next to Mizuto, less than a foot away from him. This was the appropriate distance for now.

"Do you remember the first day we went to school after we started dating?" I asked again, looking at the stars. "I was so embarrassed, and we ended up going in separately. What would've happened if we'd walked together into the classroom? Do you think anything would've changed?"

He didn't respond, so I continued. "Do you remember how on our date I wore a miniskirt? I was feeling really insecure because you hadn't really reacted at all, but right as we were about to go our separate ways for the day, you told me not to expose myself so much? I couldn't help but think you were surprisingly cuter than I'd thought."

Still no response.

"Do you remember when your class was playing soccer during gym class? I got to find out just how inept my boyfriend was at sports. I was a little disappointed at first, but in the end, I felt closer to you because we shared that ineptitude."

Still no response.

"Do you remember studying for midterms together? We flirted with each other whenever we saw the opportunity. I don't think we were able to retain any of the information we learned. I think that

might've been around the time I saved the eraser you gave me."

Memory after memory surfaced, but he still didn't respond once. These weren't memories that'd been forced onto me. These weren't memories of anyone else. These were memories that we'd made together.

"I think it was in November that I got sick and you came to visit me. Now that I think about it, you probably just wanted to see me in my pajamas. You really are such a closet perv."

Still no response.

"Oh, and then there was that time we were studying for finals. I was determined to stay focused so I could beat you. That's why I chose a public library so that we'd be on our best behavior, but...I couldn't hold back and... God, there was something really wrong with me back then. I might've still been a kid, but I can't believe I risked being seen by someone and..."

Still no response.

"We had a Christmas date just like most couples do, but I was too shy to give you your present during the date. You came all the way over to my house that night... Honestly, I was really happy."

Still no response.

"And during spring break, you invited me to your room. God, I was so nervous! But you looked completely fine, and in the end, you didn't even make a move on me...even though you had every intention to. Thinking back, I can't believe you lusted after me. I know I'm kinda shooting myself in the foot, but my proportions back then weren't all that attractive."

Still no response.

"Oh, and then there were all the times we went to secondhand bookstores or sat next to each other and secretly passed notes. That really made my heart race."

Still no response.

"Do you remember when we had our first kiss?" I did. How could I forget the incredibly blissful feelings I felt on that day we were walking home? I'd never forget. I looked at him. He continued to stare at the starry expanse, but his lips began to move.

"October 27th," he said slowly. "Exactly two months after we started dating."

"So you *do* remember. Thought as much."

"Was it that obvious?"

"I knew after you unlocked my phone at the river."

"You shouldn't use dates as passwords."

"You say that, but the fact that you were able to pull that up immediately means that you must've used it too at some point."

Mizuto was apparently pleading the fifth, but his silence might as

well have been an answer.

"It really was exactly two months after we started dating, huh?" I continued. "In the moment, I thought that if I let that chance go, I wouldn't have another one until the following month, so I panicked a little."

"And here I thought that you were being influenced by all the dubious information you'd been getting from magazines and internet forums."

"Uh... W-Well, sure, I might have used them—but just as references, okay?!"

"Uh-huh, but knowing you, if you didn't have those kinds of manuals to follow, you never would have been able to do anything as bold as that."

"Sue me! Sorry that I need manuals to function! You should be *praising* your girlfriend for having taken the initiative!"

"Oh yeah, I'm so proud of you. I bet you practiced your kissing face a lot too."

"Wha— H-How did you know?"

"It was so obvious. There was no way you'd get it so perfect on your first try."

"Shut up! I get a lot of things right on my first try!"

"Yeah, and I'm always there to cover your ass so that things don't fall apart."

"What do you want, a cookie? A *real* guy would keep these things to himself."

"Why should I care about acting like a 'real guy' in front of *you*?"

"True... There's no merit for you, and it's not like you could get me any more disillusioned with you than I already am."

"That's my line."

We kept talking to each other clearly and without pause. These were our words—nobody else's.

"I wanna set the record straight about the time you were wearing a miniskirt, though," he said.

"Oh, the time that you were acting really pathetic and possessive?"

"Listen, all I was trying to say was that miniskirts didn't suit you!"

"Uh-huh. Sure. Says the guy who forced his way into my house to see me in pajamas."

"No, that time I was just checking up on you as your boyfriend."

"Really? So whenever I feel like you're stealing glances at me in my pajamas nowadays—that's all in my head?"

"Yeah, it is. You're really so full of it. I see you in your pajamas every day. I don't care about that anymore."

"Anymore"?! I knew it! You *did* want to see me in my pajamas

back then! You closet perv!”

“Not true.”

“Sheesh, having a wuss for a boyfriend was really such a struggle. Thanks to that, I lost the chance for my first time.”

“It wouldn’t have worked out anyway, not with how tense you were from nerves. *Nothing* was getting in that day.”

“H-How dare you! You can’t say that!”

Our conversation really had no substance; it was the same kind of insubstantial conversation classmates or family members would have. How long had it taken for us to get like this? How long had it taken him?

“So...”

“What?”

“Why did you go out with me?” Finally, I was able to ask the question I’d been meaning to for two years.

Mizuto paused before answering. “True. It didn’t *have* to be you. I could’ve easily ended up dating someone else.”

“Excuse me?!”

“I just sorta went with the flow—it was a coincidence. If I’d met Higashira first, I doubt I would’ve ever gone out with you.”

“True...” He had a point. If he’d met Higashira-san before me, there wouldn’t have been any chance for me to come between them.

“But *you* were the one that I met,” he said, his voice clear. “It might’ve been nothing more than you beating someone else to the punch, but that’s the reason I said yes. Satisfied?”

“Sure...” I’d gotten to him first merely by chance. It’d been chance that I beat anyone else to the punch. It was fine—not a problem. After all, what was chance if not another way to say fate? “It’s about time.”

“Hm?”

“For your wish from two years ago to come true.” *For me, it was more like one year ago, since he hadn’t come to the last summer festival.*

He’d been the one to find me when I got lost during our aquarium date in April, but this time, I was the one who found him. I was sure that Yume Irido had surpassed Yume Ayai.

Just as the clock struck eight, the night sky was lit up by fireworks. The next moment, a thunderous boom shook our bodies. Our faces were illuminated by a myriad of colors. The fireworks were a lot louder than I’d expected. *So this is Mizuto’s secret hideout.* He came here every year, unbeknownst to anyone else, to watch the grand display of fireworks. But unfortunately for him, this wasn’t just his secret spot anymore.

“We’re finally able to see them together,” I teased.

He was a complete enigma. Stubborn to a fault, annoying, and a grade-A pain in my ass. If I didn’t put in the effort to try and read

between the lines, I'd be completely lost. He didn't express any emotions, nor did he say what he was feeling out loud. I really couldn't believe that he'd ever had a girlfriend. No wonder his relationship hadn't lasted very long. If anything, it was impressive that it had gone on for a whole year and a half. If it wasn't for the fact that we were family now, I highly doubted that I'd voluntarily be anywhere near him.

But it was thanks to this opportunity that we'd been reunited and I was able to see this side of him. I heard a sound that vanished with the whistling of the fireworks. The flashes of light illuminated his expression. If I hadn't been here, I'd never have known. If I hadn't been sitting next to him—not even a foot of space between us—I would never have seen the teardrop rolling down his face.

I began to remember all the times that I'd broken down crying in front of him. In all the time that I'd spent with him, though, I'd never once seen him cry. Nor had I ever felt like this before. My heart wasn't pounding out of my chest. I wasn't feeling so elated that it was like I was floating. I wasn't so nervous that my body tensed up. My face wasn't flushed or anything. I felt calm but warm—as if someone was hugging me.

I could feel something inside me. It was a basic instinct of humans—desire. I needed to confirm it. Fireworks didn't last that long. As soon as they burst in the sky, they disappeared and returned our surroundings to darkness, making it hard to see his face, even though he was right next to me.

The past me might not have been able to do this, but *I* could. “Look at me...”

“Hm?”

I saw his head turn towards me. *You can't be this defenseless. If you let your guard down this easily, you're going to be eaten up. Are you okay with that?* I held Mizuto's head in place with my hands.

“Wai—”

I'm not going to let you finish your sentence. It's okay. Even if it's dark, I know exactly where your lips are. In the next moment, I was met with a familiar sensation. My head was tilted slightly to the right. I wasn't going to be as clumsy this time and let our teeth slam into each other. There wasn't a need to move our faces away from each other every three seconds. *I don't want you to run away.*

Four seconds: *I wanted to get back the time we'd lost.*

Five seconds: *All the time from last year when you stopped contacting me until now.*

Six seconds: *August, September, October.*

Seven seconds: *Our birthdays, Christmas, New Year's.*

Eight seconds: *Valentine's Day, White Day, our graduation ceremony.*

Nine seconds: *We became stepsiblings.*

Ten seconds: *We're supposed to be exes, but we've been going around in circles.*

I slowly moved my face away from his. I'd gone through all the time we should have had together until now. All that was left was the here and now.

My heart wasn't racing. I was satisfied. I'd gotten back the time we'd lost. The unresolved feelings I'd had were gone. My eyes had adapted to the darkness. I could easily see Mizuto and his surprised expression. *Yeah, you should be surprised. You should be confused. You should be stressed-out.*

To you, our relationship might have just been a mess of unresolved feelings. To you, it might have just been a past relationship, but that's okay. You can play down the past as much as you want. But here's the thing... No matter how much you might have loved Yume Ayai, Yume Irido will win your heart.



That's what this kiss meant. I kissed you—not as Yume Ayai but as Yume Irido. My first kiss as her was a declaration of war against the person you cited when you rejected Higashira-san. She might have been occupying that one seat in your heart, but I was determined to steal it away from her.

I giggled and stood up and looked behind me at the shrine. Mizuto was still frozen in place. *I can't believe I've fallen for the same guy twice.* This was a trap that'd been set by a higher power—it was destiny. I kinda wanted to curse out that higher power, but at the same time, I was a little thankful.

“Let's go back, Mizuto,” I said, extending my hand to him.

He blinked in a daze before putting his fingers to his lips.

“Huh? But...”

“Hurry up! Our parents are gonna be worried!”

I pulled Mizuto to his feet. I thought I heard the grass rustle, but I was too occupied by Mizuto. It wasn't every day I got to see him this flustered.

“Oh, *there* you two are!” Madoka-san said from the front of the shrine's office. Chikuma-kun was behind her. For some reason, there were leaves on the hem of his yukata.

“Phew. I'm glad that the two of you didn't get lost too.”

“Huh? ‘Too’?”

“Oh yeah, Chikuma was lost until a little while a— Ow!”

In a rare display of rebellion, Chikuma-kun began pounding on her back. He was usually so well-behaved, this was surprising.

“What's wrong, Chikuma?” Madoka-san asked him, confused. Whatever it was, it didn't seem like he was going to give it up. Madoka-san looked at me and then Mizuto.

She walked towards me. “Did it all work out?” she asked, whispering in my ear.

“At the very least, I think I've taken the first step,” I whispered back.

“Oh, great! Hit me up if you ever need more advice! I'm rootin' for ya!”

Right as she said this, Chikuma-kun kicked her in the calf.

“Ow! Seriously, what's going on with you, Chikuma? Are you in your rebellious phase or something?” Madoka-san exclaimed.

Chikuma-kun looked first at me, then Mizuto, before hanging his head and pursing his lips. What was going on? Did something bad happen?

“Uh... Wait. Really?” It seemed that something had clicked in Madoka-san after looking at him.

He began rubbing his eyes with his sleeves, still not looking up.

“Well, what can I say? Sorry, kid...” Madoka-san was a real sister to be able to understand what was going on with Chikuma-kun without him saying anything. She hugged him and patted him on the back.

“It’s okay Chikuma. These kinds of experiences will make you into a better man. You won’t turn out like my loser boyfriend!” She chuckled, comforting the quietly crying Chikuma-kun.

“What do you think happened? Why is he crying?” I whispered in Mizuto’s ear.

“No clue...”

Apparently, we had a long way to go before becoming true siblings, but that worked for me.



Saying goodbye to everyone was a quick and simple affair.

“Bye, now! Can’t wait to see you all again! Come on. You too, Chikuma.”

“...”

“How long are you gonna sulk for?” Madoka-san asked. “If you don’t say something now, you’re gonna regret it. Don’t you wanna stay in contact?”

Before getting into their car, Chikuma-kun was ushered forward by Madoka-san until he stood in front of me. He glanced at my face and then immediately looked away. He repeated this over and over again until finally...

“U-Um...” he started.

“Yes? What is it?”

“Can I... Can I still ask you for advice...?”

He must’ve wanted to get advice from a fellow shy person, so of course, I already knew my answer.

“Of course! Message me whenever!”

Chikuma-kun’s face turned red. “Th-Thank you very much!” he said in a surprisingly loud voice. He bowed his head and ran back to Madoka-san.

“Good job! You shouldn’t get your hopes up, though. It’s just gonna hurt more later.”

Chikuma-kun groaned as if he was in pain.

“S-Sorry! The pain’s still fresh. I’ll stop teasing you for a bit, okay?”

The two of them got in the car and drove off to the station. After paying our respects to the Tanesato graves, we also got ready to leave.

“Thanks so much for coming out, Yume-chan! Please take good care of Mizuto,” Natsume-san said, beaming at me.

“He’s a lot stronger than you think. He’d be fine even if I wasn’t around,” I said, smiling back at her.

“Oh, is that so?”

“Still, I’ll take good care of him. He gets lonely surprisingly easily,” I responded in a low voice, ensuring that he couldn’t hear.

“You’ve put my mind at ease.” Natsume-san grinned.

I walked to the car where Mizuto was standing.

“What were you talking to her about?” he asked suspiciously.

“What do you think?” I asked, tilting my head and looking right at him.

Mizuto took a step back. “Okay... There’s something wrong with you. Did something inside you snap or something?”

“There’s nothing wrong with me. I’m acting perfectly normal. Maybe your information’s outdated.”

“Huh?”

“We’re ready to leave, kids,” Mineaki-ojisan called from the car.

I reached for the car door, but right before I did, I turned around and faced my ex, my stepbrother, and the person I was currently in love with.

“You don’t have to worry about me. We’re stepsiblings, Mizuto-kun,” I said with a very sarcastic smile.

“Right... Of course we are, Yume-san.”

The past was the past. We’d never get back the happiness we’d shared when we were dating, but that didn’t mean that this was the end of our story. If anything, this was like an announcement for a new book in our series. What was going to happen? Well, we’d just have to wait and see.

Isana Higashira

When I returned to the living room, Mizuto-kun was fast asleep on the couch. *Hm? Why is he asleep?* I tilted my head as I recollected the events of the day. I’d visited his home in order to watch *Your Name* together. After the film ended, his eyelids had certainly seemed heavy; however, I could have sworn that he’d chosen Yume-san’s thighs as his pillow. Now, where exactly had she disappeared to?

I tilted my head again and approached the couch. As I peered down at Mizuto-kun, deep in his peaceful slumber, I was reminded of a certain story—that of Snow White, who succumbed to the poison of the evil witch and fell into a deep slumber. Only the kiss of the prince could free her from the spell. *Hm... If that’s the case, then... If I kiss Mizuto-kun, he’ll immediately wake up.*

I’d once been warned by Yume-san not to so easily indulge in my impulses; however, she was nowhere to be seen. I was but a vehicle without any brakes. *You can’t be this defenseless. If you let your guard*

down this easily, you're going to be eaten up. Are you okay with that?

He certainly wasn't inviting me to do this, was he? Perhaps because he was the one who'd rejected me, he was too embarrassed to say it outright, so his only resort was to dole out indirect hints, nudging me to take action.

I'm fully aware that I'm making up an excuse to cover for the fact that I'm unable to restrain myself. In all fairness, though, how was I supposed to show any restraint? His lips seemed so thin and soft. They were as beautiful as a girl's. No matter how wrong I knew I was, my face felt as if it was being sucked in.

I felt his soft breath against my face. My heart was beating so quickly, it felt like it could explode at any second. I may have been even more nervous than when I'd confessed to him. *Please praise me, Mizuto-kun. Praise me for having enough restraint not to use my tongue. Also, if I may be so impudent as to ask, please don't open your eyes for just another second. As long as you don't, I will be able to have my first kiss...*

"Just kidding!" I deleted what I'd written on my tablet after quickly getting embarrassed.

I exhaled and stared at the ceiling of my room. *Hm... Writing about real people is quite embarrassing.* I'd planned on following that scene up with a very hot and steamy situation, but...perhaps not.

I'd only begun writing this story because I'd believed I could get a grip on the feelings inside me revolving around what "could have been" that day. However, I realized now that this was not an avenue I could pursue. I was fully aware of how pathetic I was.

The truth was that I *had* returned to the living room when Yumesan wasn't around. As soon as I tried to approach him to *maybe* kiss him though, I knew I couldn't, even if it may have very well been my only chance at my first and last kiss. However, kissing a person while they're unconscious is a crime.

I heavily exhaled. *Can Mizuto-kun return from his family trip already? I miss you. Where are you? I cannot sleep; I cannot dream tonight.* Perhaps I should refrain from referencing an older song like this because it made me seem older than I actually was. All of my many followers that I definitely had and were absolutely nonfictional would say that I was showing my age with this reference. However, could I really be blamed for older generations quoting it so much?!

"Mizuto-kun..." I gripped my pillow and rolled around on top of my bed.

Mizuto-kun was my *friend*. Whenever I thought of him, though, my heart would race. *What should I talk to him about tomorrow? Should I ask him if he read that book yet? Whether he enjoyed it?* I was fairly convinced that the feelings inside me were romantic, but I was at a

loss. Why was it that the idea of being his girlfriend had lost its appeal, compared to when Minami-san and Yume-san were helping me? After all, was there really such a big difference between being a friend and a romantic companion?

Friends could spend time together, hang out, have fun, and be happy together. Friends didn't break up like romantic partners. The only downside to friendship was that you could not engage in any lascivious activities. Although, there *were* certain types of friends that might still engage in them...

Regardless, I'd come to a realization. As apologetic to Yume-san and Minami-san I felt, I'd been enjoying myself much more as his friend than I had when trying to become his girlfriend. The road to enticing him to accept me as his romantic companion meant that I'd needed him to become infatuated with me. I'd have had to pretend to be someone *he* desired to go out with. He'd never see me for who I was. Continuing that pursuit would've been so tiring. I'd much rather keep things as they were. I was enjoying myself much more now, anyway.

I wasn't nervous around him. I had no need to worry about not getting my makeup right, because Mizuto-kun didn't care in the slightest. I had no need to worry about the gender barriers between us either. More than anything, I could act as I wanted to without holding back. I no longer had the pressure of confessing. I could just continue knowing that my love was one-sided.

I had no problem if he never ended up feeling the same way about me. After all, I was very much enjoying how things currently were—fantasizing, stealing glances at his face, and my heart racing uncontrollably. It was even fun to joke about my broken heart and see him get flustered. I had an endless supply of scenes with the guy I was interested in. *Isn't that fun?!*

In all likelihood, I probably did not have a broken heart. This one-sided crush of mine was more than likely the form of love most suited to me. I was a true normie. If I could ask for one wish to be granted, I'd ask to stay Mizuto-kun's friend forever. I wouldn't mind if he got a girlfriend. If he did, I was sure that she'd be just as precious as he.

So, if I had one wish, I'd wish that this one-sided crush could last forever.

Afterword

I don't have any anecdotes that link back to the story (although my great-grandfather *did* act as an interpreter while being a prisoner in an internment camp in Siberia) so I think I'd like to try having an honest conversation about the story this time. If you're starting the book from here, I strongly advise you to go back and read it first!

Almost every romantic comedy has a certain episode in which the heroine has a realization that she *does* indeed like the protagonist. Maybe it's during a sticky situation that he saves her from, or maybe it's just from naturally spending time together. Or maybe she realizes her feelings only when they *aren't* able to spend time together. There are a lot of different ways to go about it, but they all share the same theme—they see the good side of the protagonist.

So, in Yume's case, she already knew what exactly made Mizuto "good." All the scenes I've written in which Mizuto looks like a cool guy to the reader are nothing new to her. She *expects* this behavior from him. She's just started to build a bond with him as family, but can she ever fall back in love with him? Kindly, I ask you to read the novel for your answer, if you haven't.

This volume set out to show that people don't necessarily fall for others just because they know how cool they can be. Personalities are strongly affected by societal pressures, so it'd make sense that family also shapes one's personality—especially a new family.

Humans are like snow. You can shape them pretty easily if you're fast enough, but wait too long and they'll be frozen in a certain shape. When you're a high schooler, you're probably just on the verge of freezing. There are still parts of you that can be shaped and others that you just can't change anymore.

In general, people can easily be changed by others, but they can't change themselves so easily. It's a really difficult and confusing period of life. People call this "youth," but I'll leave my thoughts on the matter for another time.

The rest of this afterword will be an advertisement for my new book called *Tensei Gotoki de Nigerareru to Demo, Nii-san?* will be published by MF Bunko J on March 25th, 2020. Or at least I think it will be. I just have to pray that it gets through the Kadokawa review okay without too many words being flagged.

As usual, it'll be a complicated story about love. There's a little sister whose love is a *little* heavy. Just a little. Only a teensy bit. She's about a hundred million times worse than Akatsuki Minami in middle school.

I recommend you read it and then return to reading *StepExes*. I believe it'll make you treasure the relationship between Mizuto and Yume even more. It'll really make you feel so much better and happier. So just try reading it, okay? Just this once, I swear.

Oh, also, we have an official Twitter account for the novel (@tsurekano). We're planning on publishing some side stories, so be sure to follow the account for the extra content!

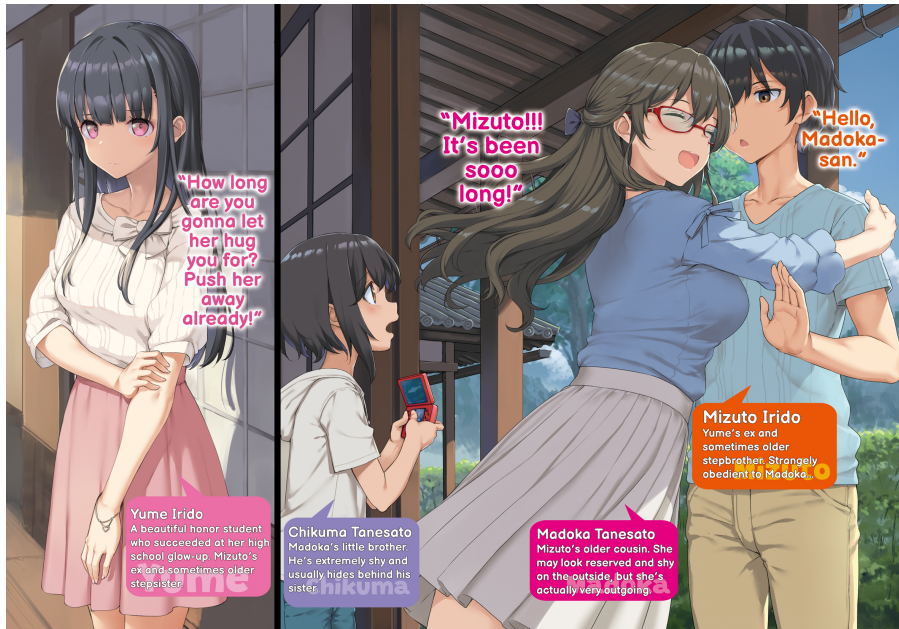
A big thanks to TakayaKi for his illustrations, Rei Kusakabe for her work on the manga, my editor, the novel's designer, our proofreader, the bookstore staff, everyone who helped work on this series, and of course, to you, the readers!

This is where we'll say goodbye for now. I might've said before that there wouldn't be multiple heroines who compete for the protagonist, but...that was a lie. Now Yume has to fight against her past self. Hm? What about Isana Higashira? She's lying on the ground reading a light novel. She's not even trying to compete.

And with that, you've reached the end of Kyosuke Kamishiro's *My Stepmom's Daughter Is My Ex: First Kiss Manifesto*. Their summer vacation just keeps going on forever, doesn't it?



My Stepmom's Daughter Is My Ex 4
"First Kiss Manifesto"



Yume Irido

A beautiful honor student who succeeded at her high school glow up. Mizuto's ex and sometimes older stepsister.

Chikuma Tanesato

Madoka's little brother. He's extremely shy and usually hides behind his sister.

Madoka Tanesato

Mizuto's older cousin. She may look reserved and shy on the outside, but she's actually very outgoing.

Mizuto Irido

Yume's ex and sometimes older stepbrother. Strangely obedient to Madoka.

"You
really
liked me,
didn't
you?"

"You..."
I began
giggling in a
way I never
would've
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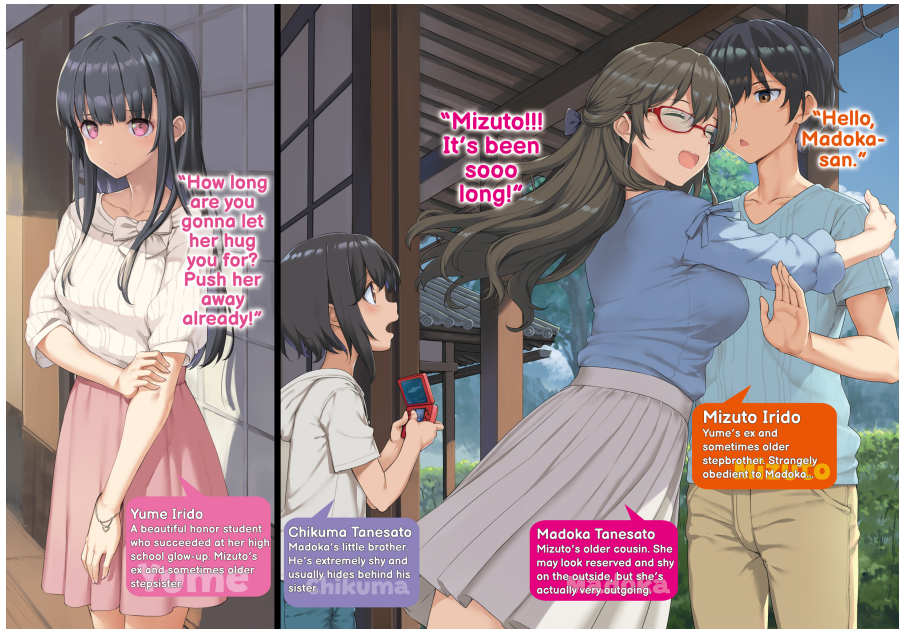
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TakayaKi



**My Stepmom's
Daughter Is My Ex**
"First Kiss Manifesto"



My Stepmom's Daughter Is My Ex 4
"First Kiss Manifesto"



"You
really
liked me,
didn't
you?"

"You..."
I began
giggling in a
way I never
would've
been able to
two years
ago.





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by Kyosuke Kamishiro

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